

Cabrera Brothers

OCTOBER 2020

FREE BUNDLE

SCIENCE FICTION

John Mara

H. P. Lovecraft

Eva Schultz

Judson Blake

J. David Thayer

Kyle Tinga

Javier Cabrera



Time Again

by Judson Blake

Abraham Van Helsing—Eradicator

by Javier Cabrera

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Dear friend,

It is my happy privilege and pleasant duty to extend you an invitation to the Society of Extraordinary Readers.

As the literary world descends into a new age of darkness, it falls upon our beloved society and its members to maintain the adventure genre alive.

There is a great danger hovering above us. I do not dare to write about it here, as I am afraid it would put your life under unnecessary risk, but it is of the utmost urgency that you come here at once. We must meet.

Instructions to reach our secret headquarters in Darrington Manor are enclosed with this letter. Our staff has already been informed of your arrival and will be at your disposal.

Hoping to see you soon,

Sir Nathanial Baker

TODAY!

Get ready, you go next.



THROUGH
THE GATES OF
MADNESS

Cabrera Brothers

FREE BUNDLE ORIGINALS

Fiction podcasts done right.

DOG

DRAW ME UGLY,
AND I'LL HAVE
TO GET UGLY



WIN A DOG MINI-BUST!

A MINI-BUST? YES! A MINI-BUST!

With every new issue of the Free Bundle, we like to give something extra to our readers. This time we asked Dog to give us a hand. Because it was for you, he said yes and spent a full day in our offices helping our sculptors with a very unique surprise: a mini-bust!

FANTASTIC PRIZES!

Grand Prize (1)

One lucky dog will win an original Dogeron DOG Kenan cold-cast porcelain bust from our upcoming video game codenamed "CYPHER 2" signed by no other than the Cabrera Brothers. Dog himself modeled for this mini-bust!

First Prize (10)

Ten almost-lucky dogs will get an original Dogeron DOG Kenan art piece from DOG's current comic run, signed (of course) by the Cabrera Brothers.

Here's the deal

What you have to do is simple: using our webcomic as a guide, take your favorite pencils, pens or digital tablet and draw your own Dogeron "Dog" Kenan. Send your version to our mailroom. Every issue, the artist with the most creative, original, and cool piece will win these fine...

Cabrera Brothers

FREE BUNDLE

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION

Editor: Javier Cabrera
Art: Carlos Cabrera, Javier Cabrera
#THEFREEBUNDLE

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Cabrera Brothers

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Scream with Halloween Nights 2020

Well, better late than ever, right? We had planned a full month of Halloween this year for our "Halloween Nights 2020", but things got slightly out of control. We have, however, the Halloween weekend ahead of us! We can't avoid feeling we let you and ourselves down, though. That is why we are going to make some changes.

Among those changes coming to our website, we will include a calendar and a count-down clock, so you can know precisely when the Free Bundle Magazine's next issue is coming.

But enough of promises. If you haven't yet, you might want to go to our website and check the "Spooky 2020" tab for some incredible giveaway contest and the launching of our Digital Trading Cards!

Let's keep this editorial short though, there is a lot in this issue for you to read, starting with Lovecraft's best short story to date (according to myself, that is). I'm talking about Herbert West---Reanimator. We are also including some fantastic stories by upcoming authors we think you might enjoy, especially during the spooky Halloween season.

Like always, I want to thank you personally for your continuous support. We have so many surprises in store by December that we can't hardly wait.



Javier Cabrera
Editor



HERBERT WEST----REANIMATOR

From The Dark

By H. P. Lovecraft

Folks, it eventually had to happen: we are going to start serializing some stories from the golden pulp fiction era. They are simply too amazing to be forgotten. In this issue of the Free Bundle Magazine, we are absolutely thrilled to introduce you to the first story from the *Herbert West--Reanimator* series, first published under the title of "Grewsome Tales" as a six part serial in *Home Brew* (Feb-Jul 1922).

Of Herbert West, who was my friend in college and in after life, I can speak only with extreme terror. This terror is not due altogether to the sinister manner of his recent disappearance, but was engendered by the whole nature of his life-work, and first gained its acute form more than seventeen years ago, when we were in the third year of our course at the Miskatonic University Medical School in Arkham. While he was with me, the wonder and diabolism of his experiments fascinated me utterly, and I was his closest companion. Now that he is gone and the spell is broken, the actual fear is greater. Memories and possibilities are ever more hideous than realities.

The first horrible incident of our acquaintance was the greatest shock I ever experienced, and it is only with reluctance that I repeat it. As I have said, it happened when we were in the medical

school, where West had already made himself notorious through his wild theories on the nature of death and the possibility of overcoming it artificially. His views, which were widely ridiculed by the faculty and his fellow-students, hinged on the essentially mechanistic nature of life; and concerned means for operating the organic machinery of mankind by calculated chemical action after the failure of natural processes. In his experiments with various animating solutions he had killed and treated immense numbers of rabbits, guinea-pigs, cats, dogs, and monkeys, till he had become the prime nuisance of the college. Several times he had actually obtained signs of life in animals supposedly dead; in many cases violent signs; but he soon saw that the perfection of this process, if indeed possible, would necessarily involve a lifetime of research. It likewise became clear that, since the same solution never worked alike on different organic species, he would require human subjects for further and more specialised progress. It was here that he first came into conflict with the college authorities, and was debarred from future experiments by no less a dignitary than the dean of the medical school himself—the learned and benevolent Dr. Allan Halsey, whose work in behalf of the stricken is recalled by every old resident of Arkham.

I had always been exceptionally tolerant of West's pursuits, and we frequently discussed his theories, whose ramifications and corollaries were almost infinite. Holding with Haeckel that all life is a chemical and physical process, and that the so-called "soul" is a myth, my friend believed that artificial reanimation of the dead can depend only on the condition of the tissues; and that unless actual decomposition has set in, a corpse fully equipped with organs may with suitable measures be set going again in the peculiar fashion known as life. That the psychic or intellectual life might be impaired by

the slight deterioration of sensitive brain-cells which even a short period of death would be apt to cause, West fully realised. It had at first been his hope to find a reagent which would restore vitality before the actual advent of death, and only repeated failures on animals had shewn him that the natural and artificial life-motions were incompatible. He then sought extreme freshness in his specimens, injecting his solutions into the blood immediately after the extinction of life. It was this circumstance which made the professors so carelessly sceptical, for they felt that true death had not occurred in any case. They did not stop to view the matter closely and reasonably.

It was not long after the faculty had interdicted his work that West confided to me his resolution to get fresh human bodies in some manner, and continue in secret the experiments he could no longer perform openly. To hear him discussing ways and means was rather ghastly, for at the college we had never procured anatomical specimens ourselves. Whenever the morgue proved inadequate, two local negroes attended to this matter, and they were seldom questioned. West was then a small, slender, spectacled youth with delicate features, yellow hair, pale blue eyes, and a soft voice, and it was uncanny to hear him dwelling on the relative merits of Christchurch Cemetery and the potter's field. We finally decided on the potter's field, because practically every body in Christchurch was embalmed; a thing of course ruinous to West's researches.

I was by this time his active and enthralled assistant, and helped him make all his decisions, not only concerning the source of bodies but concerning a suitable place for our loathsome work. It was I who thought of the deserted Chapman farmhouse beyond Meadow Hill, where we fitted up on the ground floor an operating room and a laboratory, each with dark curtains to conceal our

FROM THE DARK

midnight doings. The place was far from any road, and in sight of no other house, yet precautions were none the less necessary; since rumours of strange lights, started by chance nocturnal roamers, would soon bring disaster on our enterprise. It was agreed to call the whole thing a chemical laboratory if discovery should occur. Gradually we equipped our sinister haunt of science with materials either purchased in Boston or quietly borrowed from the college—materials carefully made unrecognisable save to expert eyes—and provided spades and picks for the many burials we should have to make in the cellar. At the college we used an incinerator, but the apparatus was too costly for our unauthorised laboratory. Bodies were always a nuisance—even the small guinea-pig bodies from the slight clandestine experiments in West's room at the boarding-house.

We followed the local death-notices like ghouls, for our specimens demanded particular qualities. What we wanted were corpses interred soon after death and without artificial preservation; preferably free from malforming disease, and certainly with all organs present. Accident victims were our best hope. Not for many weeks did we hear of anything suitable; though we talked with morgue and hospital authorities, ostensibly in the college's interest, as often as we could without exciting suspicion. We found that the college had first choice in every case, so that it might be necessary to remain in Arkham during the summer, when only the limited summer-school classes were held. In the end, though, luck favoured us; for one day we heard of an almost ideal case in the potter's field; a brawny young workman drowned only the morning before in Sumner's Pond, and buried at the town's expense without delay or embalming. That afternoon we found the new grave, and determined to begin work soon after midnight.

It was a repulsive task that we undertook in the black small hours, even though we lacked at that time the special horror of graveyards which later experiences brought to us. We carried spades and oil dark lanterns, for although electric torches were then manufactured, they were not as satisfactory as the tungsten contrivances of today. The process of unearthing was slow and sordid—it might have been gruesomely poetical if we had been artists instead of scientists—and we were glad when our spades struck wood. When the pine box was fully uncovered West scrambled down and removed the lid, dragging out and propping up the contents. I reached down and hauled the contents out of the grave, and then both toiled hard to restore the spot to its former appearance. The affair made us rather nervous, especially the stiff form and vacant face of our first trophy, but we managed to remove all traces of our visit. When we had patted down the last shovelful of earth we put the specimen in a canvas sack and set out for the old Chapman place beyond Meadow Hill.

On an improvised dissecting-table in the old farmhouse, by the light of a powerful acetylene lamp, the specimen was not very spectral looking. It had been a sturdy and apparently unimaginative youth of wholesome plebeian type—large-framed, grey-eyed, and brown-haired—a sound animal without psychological subtleties, and probably having vital processes of the simplest and healthiest sort. Now, with the eyes closed, it looked more asleep than dead; though the expert test of my friend soon left no doubt on that score. We had at last what West had always longed for—a real dead man of the ideal kind, ready for the solution as prepared according to the most careful calculations and theories for human use. The tension on our part became very great. We knew that there was scarcely a chance for anything like complete success, and could

not avoid hideous fears at possible grotesque results of partial animation. Especially were we apprehensive concerning the mind and impulses of the creature, since in the space following death some of the more delicate cerebral cells might well have suffered deterioration. I, myself, still held some curious notions about the traditional "soul" of man, and felt an awe at the secrets that might be told by one returning from the dead. I wondered what sights this placid youth might have seen in inaccessible spheres, and what he could relate if fully restored to life. But my wonder was not overwhelming, since for the most part I shared the materialism of my friend. He was calmer than I as he forced a large quantity of his fluid into a vein of the body's arm, immediately binding the incision securely.

The waiting was gruesome, but West never faltered. Every now and then he applied his stethoscope to the specimen, and bore the negative results philosophically. After about three-quarters of an hour without the least sign of life he disappointedly pronounced the solution inadequate, but determined to make the most of his opportunity and try one change in the formula before disposing of his ghastly prize. We had that afternoon dug a grave in the cellar, and would have to fill it by dawn—for although we had fixed a lock on the house we wished to shun even the remotest risk of a ghoulish discovery. Besides, the body would not be even approximately fresh the next night. So taking the solitary acetylene lamp into the adjacent laboratory, we left our silent guest on the slab in the dark, and bent every energy to the mixing of a new solution; the weighing and measuring supervised by West with an almost fanatical care.

The awful event was very sudden, and wholly unexpected. I was pouring something from one test-tube to another, and West was busy over the alcohol blast-lamp which had to

answer for a Bunsen burner in this gasless edifice, when from the pitch-black room we had left there burst the most appalling and daemonic succession of cries that either of us had ever heard. Not more unutterable could have been the chaos of hellish sound if the pit itself had opened to release the agony of the damned, for in one inconceivable cacophony was centred all the supernal terror and unnatural despair of animate nature. Human it could not have been—it is not in man to make such sounds—and without a thought of our late employment or its possible discovery both West and I leaped to the nearest window like stricken animals; overturning tubes, lamp, and retorts, and vaulting madly into the starred abyss of the rural night. I think we screamed ourselves as we stumbled frantically toward the town, though as we reached the outskirts we put on a semblance of restraint—just enough to seem like belated revellers staggering home from a debauch.

We did not separate, but managed to get to West's room, where we whispered with the gas up until dawn. By then we had calmed ourselves a little with rational theories and plans for investigation, so that we could sleep through the day—classes being disregarded. But that evening two items in the paper, wholly unrelated, made it again impossible for us to sleep. The old deserted Chapman house had inexplicably burned to an amorphous heap of ashes; that we could understand because of the upset lamp. Also, an attempt had been made to disturb a new grave in the potter's field, as if by futile and spadeless clawing at the earth. That we could not understand, for we had patted down the mould very carefully.

And for seventeen years after that West would look frequently over his shoulder, and complain of fancied footsteps behind him. Now he has disappeared.

In the future, ID Cards are more than what they seem...

DP Card

by Eva Schultz

Eva Schultz lives in Aurora, Illinois, where she is a business writer by day and a fiction writer by night. Her work has appeared in Blind Corner Literary, All Worlds Wayfarer, and Writer's Digest. She lives with a big orange cat named Gus and enjoys drawing, painting, and collecting typewriters.

[https://facebook.com/EvaSchultzCreative.](https://facebook.com/EvaSchultzCreative)



Gracen slipped her card into the slot and felt a tingle. She jerked and glanced up at Shadow to see if he had noticed. He had pushed the door open and was peering into the room before them, focused on the task.

She took a shaky breath and withdrew the card, mechanically tucking it away and following Shadow into the facility. She couldn't take in anything she saw as her husband led her through the dim passage way. Her fingertips still tingled. She'd thought the card had more life in it when they bought it off a dealer in the

blue zone. He'd handed it to her while Shadow watched for patrollers at the mouth of the alley.

"It's almost a month old," the dealer had said, his sharp eyes constantly shifting. He pulled his coat tighter. "You want to use it in the next two weeks, or the programming will be too degraded to protect you."

It had only been six days since that encounter, but she knew she couldn't blame the dealer. He had done right by them in the past, selling them a crate of grenades that their resistance cohorts carried into a successful skirmish along the eastern border. His two-week estimate must have been his best guess; there was no way to guarantee how long a DP card would last before the ad hoc protections were fully outdated.

Shadow glanced back at her, and the low light wasn't enough to blur away the old scar across his forehead and cheek. She wanted more than anything to tell him about the DP card, ask him what to do, but she pursed her lips, nodded, and followed him silently.

She remembered the first time she'd heard the term "DP card" and asked him what it was.

"Death penalty card," Shadow had replied, his brow rippling, looking away from her. "Stolen ident cards, reprogrammed so you can use them even though your biosignature doesn't match the card's chip. You can get in places you're not authorized without the card's defense activating."

The defense, she learned, was a deadly jolt that a misused card would deliver for any unauthorized entry attempt. Gracen had wondered at the time why anyone would use such a Russian Roulette of a key; even on an important mission, it seemed like too much of a risk.

The memory felt so far away – it was before they were married, before the scars, before heavy losses on the resistance side had compelled them to step up into their role as

suppliers, locating and liberating whatever their side needed to stay afloat in this ocean of war. Today, it was a box of the newest model of laser pistols the government troops were being issued, for use in personal force field development. If the resistance could program the right defensive codes, it could help them turn the tide.

The fighting had moved south unexpectedly last night, leaving minimal staff to guard this location, so Shadow and Gracen had been dispatched to seize the weapons before this window of opportunity closed.

They came around a corner, and Gracen stiffened when she saw the card reader beside the door. She fought to keep her feelings from showing, even though Shadow was still ahead of her.

Maybe she had imagined the whole thing – it had been the faintest tingle, and hadn't she been anticipating it? Perhaps it was all in her head. They could still get in and out of the facility with the pistols, go back to the resistance encampment, curl together on their cot, fall asleep with the hum of the generator as their serenade. If she concentrated, she could put herself there in her mind, feel his embrace, smell the warm, stale air of home.

Shadow moved to the side so that Gracen could access the slot. She swallowed and inserted the card.

The energy crackled into her hand and up her arm.

The door slid open, and Gracen barely hid her reaction as Shadow moved forward. She stood frozen, her palm still burning. She only found the power to move again after Shadow was halfway down the narrow corridor ahead.

DP means Death Penalty. The words rang in her head as she moved after her husband on stiff legs, gulping in shallow breaths.

Shadow would want her to tell him. And she knew exactly what he would do.

Her husband would take the card away from her, send her to retrieve the pistols, and open the door himself. He trusted her, respected her, but when it came down to it, he would never allow her to take a risk if he could take it for her. Gracen's mind drifted to the night raid just over a year ago, when he had shoved her hard to the side and taken the laser blast for her. She knew he didn't resent her for it – over the long weeks of recovery, he'd made that clear. But it had left her with a deep well of guilt every time she looked at his scarred face.

All she had to do was tell him, and he'd take the card.

There was only one more card slot reader ahead of them. After he retrieved a box of the new pistols from the storage room, she would unlock the final door leading out the back end of the facility and out into the night. The building had been designed with no outside access to weapons storage – an attempt to create easy egress for authorized users while making it that much more of a risk for infiltrators to reach the storage room. If it weren't for the moving battlefield, she and Shadow would never have had the opportunity to get this far.

If. A small word that said so much. If she told him. If she didn't. If she put the card in that final slot herself.

Entering the room ahead of her, Shadow turned his head, and she could see the scar. For a moment she was back in that battle, staring at her husband's still form, the shock in his eyes, the smoking red streak across his perfect skin. For several agonizing moments, she had thought he was dead and that she was entirely alone in the world.

Could she put him in that position now? Could she leave him to live with the memory of tonight burned into his heart forever as he stumbled back to the resistance with a crate of pistols clutched to his chest?

Shadow moved down the row of storage

shelves and back toward the wall.

Gracen didn't want to die. She knew she didn't have to. But could she walk away from his body, huddle alone in their cot tonight, survive the bleak days to come, find a way to keep fighting?

She moved to the card reader beside the exit door.

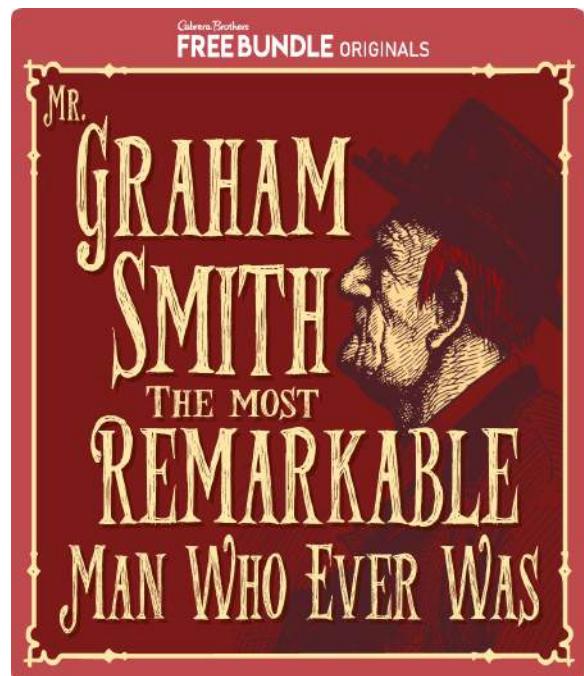
Maybe she would survive the defensive blast. Maybe the card would make it through one more use, and they would both get away.

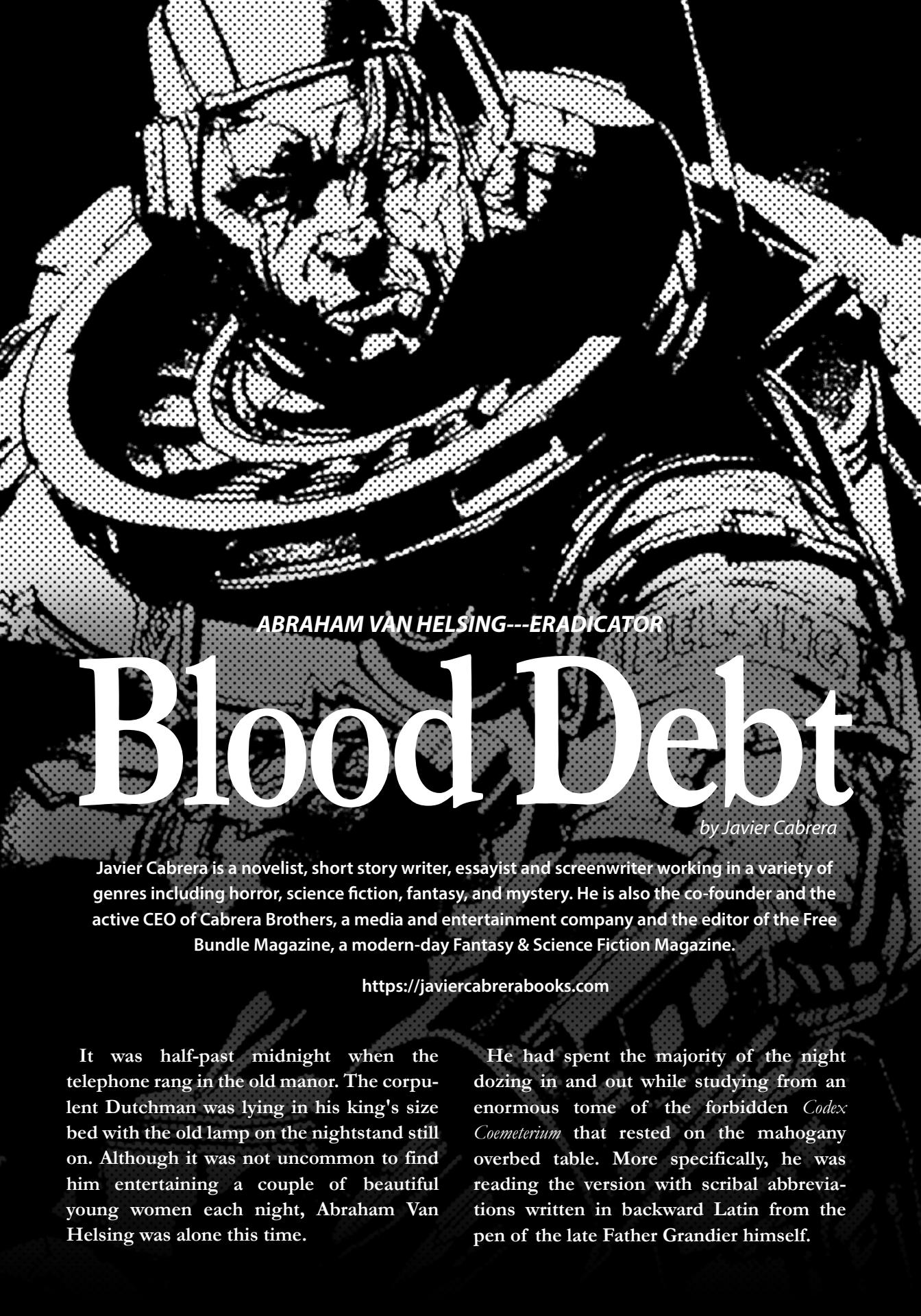
She saw Shadow pull the box off the shelf. She could feel his arms around her, protecting her from this world, promising to take terror and pain and death into himself so she didn't have to face any of it.

If she looked into his eyes again, she knew she would falter. She would tell him the truth, let him save her.

Gracen swallowed hard and breathed low and fast.

She slipped her card into the slot.





ABRAHAM VAN HELSING---ERADICATOR

Blood Debt

by Javier Cabrera

Javier Cabrera is a novelist, short story writer, essayist and screenwriter working in a variety of genres including horror, science fiction, fantasy, and mystery. He is also the co-founder and the active CEO of Cabrera Brothers, a media and entertainment company and the editor of the Free Bundle Magazine, a modern-day Fantasy & Science Fiction Magazine.

<https://javiercabrerabooks.com>

It was half-past midnight when the telephone rang in the old manor. The corpulent Dutchman was lying in his king's size bed with the old lamp on the nightstand still on. Although it was not uncommon to find him entertaining a couple of beautiful young women each night, Abraham Van Helsing was alone this time.

He had spent the majority of the night dozing in and out while studying from an enormous tome of the forbidden *Codex Coemeterium* that rested on the mahogany overbed table. More specifically, he was reading the version with scribal abbreviations written in backward Latin from the pen of the late Father Grandier himself.

BLOOD DEBT

The phone rang a second time. Abraham wasn't still fully awake when he reached for the receiver and plucked it out of the luxurious wall cradle.

"Yes?" He coughed.

"We got him," the ragged voice of an old man said, "you were right; the son of bitch was up there all along."

Abraham tasted something awful in his mouth and coughed again. "Mason? What time is it?"

"Over there? Midnight or something, I don't know. Look, you better to come over, I'm telling you; we have the bastard."

Abraham asked something, but the words slurred in his mouth, so he repeated it, "How sure are you this time?"

"Pretty damn sure," The voice said.

Without fully opening his eyes, Abraham sank in his pillow again, still holding the receiver against his ear. "You said the same the last ten times, you crazy old fool."

"The last ten times, I didn't have a working *Photophone*."

"And you have one now."

"I sure do," Mason said.

After Abraham failed to comment on that, the old man laughed, "You've no idea of what I'm talking about, have you?"

"No, not really. One of those dangerously stupid machines you insist on wasting your last couple of good years, I suppose."

"Look, brother, I was just looking into this because you asked me to. As a favor. If it is all the same to you..."

"No, no, go ahead," Abraham said, sitting up on the bed and rubbing the sleep from his eyes, "you caught me about to fall asleep, that's all. You were saying something about a--"

"A Photophone." Mason said while lighting himself a cigarette, "You are right about something, though; this thing is dangerous. It got the man who first built it killed."

"Who?"

"Some guy named Braun. He was a professor somewhere in England."

"Never heard of him," Abraham said, but something tickled him in the back of his mind, "Wait, Braun?"

"Braun, yeah. Does the name rings a bell?"

Abraham took a moment to go through his memory, but it wasn't getting nowhere, so he let it alone, "Vaguely. Something about his death shocked certain academic circles, but I can't recall what."

Mason's voice dimmed out as he spoke away from the phone. Abraham caught the sound of papers being push around in a messy desk. Mason was going through his notes. Finally, he said, "Braun, 1857. He got decapitated by one of his students in front of a faculty member in the family manor. Maybe that's what shocked people; he got his damn head chopped off."

"Because of this... *Photophone*."

"Uh-hu," Mason said, "A few news articles say one of the eyewitnesses blamed the machine for what happened."

Abraham yawned, "I don't recall any of that being mentioned."

"Strange, his case was all over the newspapers."

"I was in India at the time; news traveled different back then."

Mason laughed, "Leading the revolt or something?"

"Hunting."

"Well, if you feel like doing some more of that, I'm looking at your old friend through this dangerously stupid machine as we speak."

Abraham felt a sudden throbbing ache on an old injury he hadn't had troubles in years burn its way into the flesh of his left leg. It was as if the memory of a distant pain had inexplicably awakened to torment him.

"Mason, when you say you are looking at him, what do you mean exactly?"

"Take a plane down here and see for yourself."

"Don't move," Abraham said, then racked the receiver back into the wall cradle, closed the large, heavy book he was reading from as if the pages were made out of nitroglycerin, and slid out of bed. His hurry was such that he did not bother putting on his night robe; instead, he walked across the spacious bedroom as graciously naked as he was brought into the world.

As Abraham went down the white marble stairs, four of the nine Filipino servants who tended the old manor were cleaning one of the two immense 16-century crystal chandeliers that hang from the ceiling of the great hall with damp cloths and the care one would use only to clean a child's face. One of the servants holding a ladder for the others saw Abraham heading for his study and said, "Working late Today, Master Helsing?"

"Always, Joselito, my boy. Always."

Naked, Abraham pulled open the emerald-color double doors exquisitely hand-carved in African Agarwood. But, before entering into his private study, he turned and said, "Joselito, would you please do me a favor and phone George? Tell him to fuel up the plane at once. Transatlantic."

The servant nodded and quickly vanished behind a curtain. Abraham walked inside his study, shutting the doors behind him. Aided by the pale moonlight, he found his way across the carpet and to his desk, then flipped the switch on the French lamp. After quickly making sure none of the servants were in the study with him, Abraham reached over the large cedar desk and pushed a hidden button with fingerprinting recognition under one of the drawers.

The study windows became opaque. The south wall slid open with the sound of a snake hissing in the jungle. A secret passage had been

revealed. Abraham flipped a series of switches on the door frame to get the lights working; for security reasons, the electrical installation was separated from the rest of the manor.

Embedded within the secret passage's narrow gray stone walls, a series of dim, yellowish light bulbs revealed a most extraordinary and grotesque collection of rare reliquaries of esoteric nature.

The objects in macabre display ranged from the original Buddha's Finger Bones, dug out from the Dharma Gate Monastery's very foundations, to the mummified head of one of the four deceased Teutonic warlords, found in a Nazi crypt under Wewelsburg Castle by the Allied during the Second World War. Hanged next to the exquisitely complex astrological orb Hew Draper carved on a wall of the Tower of London when he was imprisoned for practicing witchcraft in 1561 were several symbols of various religious orders. A strangely shaped flask partially filled with Sangraal that got smuggled out of Constantinople by a Turk soldier on the second day after the city fell, and the stone that killed Goliath, smeared with the giant's own crushed brains, which, to this day, remain fresh.

Reaching the end of the narrow corridor was a large metal door with a keypad. Abraham punched in a sixteen number code, thought for a moment which day it was, then bent over to the keypad, and said, "On her head rests a crown of twelve stars." It was Wednesday's code. The door unlocked.

As Abraham stepped inside, a series of incandescent tubes began flickering on, one after another, revealing a large circular hall. Rows of wooden shelves covered the peculiar room from floor to ceiling with a most impressive collection of books in the forbidden arts.

With great care, Abraham slid the copy of the *Codex Coemeterium* in one of the divination shelves. He took a moment to make sure the

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blessed chains held it in place properly, then walked towards the red Chinese cabinet that stood like a shrine in the middle of the hall and pulled both doors open.

From the considerably varied number of swords, guns, and spears stored in the cabinet, Abraham chose a handcrafted wooden toolbox the size of an accordion case. Aside from a brass cross nailed on its front, where a double door was held together by a hook lock, the box's design and general aspect lacked any remarkable features. It was rather unimpressive looking, of ordinary wood and quite battered by the extensive use over the years—something unusual for a man of tastes as exquisites as Abraham's.

But when his hand reached the latch to open the box, its importance became evident. The room's lights seemed to dim their brightness for a moment. The evil contained in the secret library's countless books knew what was inside, and it feared it. Inside, the box opened to a portable apothecary, with objects ranging from a silver cross blessed by Giovanni Maria Mastai Ferretti when he became head of the Catholic Church, in 1846, to an unregistered magnum .357, and a small but thoroughly sharpened collection of wooden stakes.

The interior was covered with small bottles of thick glass, each containing a dangerous selection of herbs and spices found in the most obscure corners of the world. The assortment included Wild Rose, Hawthorn, and Garlic, besides the petals of a flower that had gone extinct long ago, but was available to Abraham thanks to the private garden his servants jealously maintained in the inner patio of his manor.

The center part was reserved for a set of Tibetan instruments made from human bones of a sickening yellowish tone. They had been used to perform the Fangxiangshi, the Chinese ritual of exorcism, by wanderer monks in East

Asia centuries ago. Inside, there were also a fireproof glove and dark protection glasses, both of which Abraham put on.

With his left hand, he slowly pulled open one of the small wooden drawers of the apothecary. Inside, a box made from the obsidian taken from pieces of an altar the Aztec priests of Takal built to shed blood in the name of their Astral Gods shone with a devilish red tint.

After opening the small box, he rushed to snatch something from within with the fireproof glove and held it in front of him. He opened the hand, barely, just enough to let a small portion of the object peek between his fingers. The poisonous glow of the amorphous rock danced with the joy of a freed demon on the reflection of his protective glasses.

"Time to return you the favor, John..." Abraham murmured.

It takes a significant amount of creativity to make a scholar as deeply knowledgeable into the obscure arts of the arcane as Abraham Van Helsing gasp with stupor.

The contraption of unusual strangeness in which the old man was working on when Abraham walked through the half-opened door of the abandoned hangar in the vicinity of Slab City certainly achieved that.

The apparatus seemed to be made predominantly out of a combination of aged brass and dark oak. It was almost as tall as the ceiling of the hangar itself, which was nothing short of extraordinary considering the hangar was built to house up to twenty aircraft. Only the masterful blend between engineering and craftsmanship could be responsible for such a feat, and Abraham knew it.

While evidently re-built in part with more modern materials and lesser quality, the structure still bore certain nostalgic resemblances of its obscure past, particularly in its peculiar and exquisite engravings. The designs were of the

Germanic civilization, a period the Dutchman was very well versed in.

Neither the vulgarity of the exposed electrical wires with their bright-colored plastic insulations nor the custom cheap aluminum pieces Mason had been forced to use to complete the archaic device were enough to fade its original and disturbingly fantastic splendor.

Its silhouette was as remarkable as it was perturbing. At one of its extremes, the machine bore a certain disgusting resemblance to the swollen abdomen of a spider of disproportionated dimensions. The other, narrower in construction, twisted into itself, forming a sort of vine extending further away from the base and ending on an almost sharp edge that pointed towards an opening on the hangar's ceiling.

At the end of this thin and narrow edge, there was a large funnel of conical shape. Inside, an array of strange jewelry inlays formed odd geometrical patterns, some of which Abraham recognized from the Da Liu Ren, one of the Chinese books of astral divination. Others were evidently from Persian origin, though these he could not place. He noticed, though, that the pale glow that emanated from within the walls of the cone seemed not only to reflect the moonlight through its queer astronomical patterns but to trap it as well.

As Abraham made his way through the intricate jungle of rubber tubes that hanged from the walls and meandered across the floor, he noticed a thick liquid sluggishly being feed into the contraption. The liquid glowed dimly in the dark with a color of purulent hue and almost seemed to crawl with a will of its own. He was not surprised; Mason was not only a gifted engineer but a master alchemist.

Yet, the skillfulness and grace required to conceive a machine of such strange and unusu-

al characteristics was, undoubtedly, the signature of a builder with knowledge not only of engineering but also of the secret whispers of the stars. Its base bore some ancient logograms from the forgotten version of the Vedanga Jyotisha, and at least two dozen more Abraham himself couldn't recognize.

At the feet of the machine, sitting on a big cushioned office chair, was Mason. The old man, of frail and thin features, was hunched down intensely peering through an eyepiece. The instrument held certain similarities to that of a submarine's periscope but was exquisitely labored in brass and silver. It connected through a series of equally ornate tubes into the machine's very heart. Whatever was the old man was looking at, it had his utmost attention. In fact, he was so absorbed by it, so fascinated by the image, that he didn't even turn when Abraham accidentally knocked down a tool tray with an elbow.

"Over here," Mason said, the upper half of his face being bathed with a reddish incandescent light, "Have you seen something like this baby before?"

Abraham put down his wooden toolbox, "It has been high on the list of academic rumors over the years. They hardly make it any justice."

"She's beautiful, isn't she?"

Abraham moved carefully through clouds of hot steam that every part of the machine seemed to be furiously exhaling with each contortion. There were heaps of cogs and loose screws piled up like ant nests all over the place, and though they might have seemed unimportant to Abraham, he had known Mason long enough to know he worked messily but under a strict logical structure.

"How long did it take you to build this?"

"Too long," Mason said, "She was confiscated after the trials for Braun's murder. They didn't know where to put her, so she stayed in the Crown Court's basement for years until

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they needed the space. She then got moved to Wales to be dismantled. They needed to make room for the Island's art treasures during the Second World War. That's where she got lost."

"Do you realize you are referring to this thing with a female pronoun?"

"I do."

Abraham knew Mason since he was barely a troubled young man and was familiar with his eccentricities. There was, without a doubt, a strong connection between the old man and machines. A bond, both as cruel as sinister that went beyond the clutches of time.

The Dutchman took a few steps around the monstrous device to give himself time to admire the elegance of its construction. At last, he pulled a long ivory pipe from his jacket left pocket, grabbed a propane torch sitting in Mason's workstation, and lit it. After puffing a handful of smoke, he turned to the old man and said, "I've seen you build mechanic monsters before, but never something like this."

It was a compliment, but Mason was so taken by whatever image the machine showed him that he barely heard it.

"Where did you find all this?" Abraham said.

"Part I owned, the rest I bought from several private collectors over the years. I've been trying to figure out inner mechanics for a long time, like those damn silver discs on that table over there. They are supposed to translate sounds into words, but I can't get them to work. The rest was pretty straightforward, actually."

Abraham nodded his head towards the curious eyepiece. "Is that what you wanted to show me?"

"Yes," Mason said, "try not to touch anything; she's very delicate, but go ahead, take a look."

The image the inner lenses in the machine reflected on the eyepiece was challenging to

watch because of the overwhelming bright red light that engulfed it.

Even when looking through the polarized glass Mason had installed, something which was obviously not part of the original design, one was only able to stare at it for short, uncomfortable periods before the eyes began to hurt.

Thus, a combination of short gazes while avoiding to squint was necessary to stimulate one's retinal photoreceptors and form a negative of the image that burned momentarily into one's brain, as it happens when staring at a light bulb for an extended period.

"Can you see him?" Mason said.

It took Abraham a moment to make up his mind. When he finally did, he said, "Yes, I can see it. How is this even possible?"

"Alexander Graham Bell's greatest invention wasn't what most folks think it was," Mason said, "It was this right here; the Photophone. He was able to capture sounds traveling through beams of light and reproduce them with a device similar to this one."

Abraham had to rest his eyes for a moment. "So this what got Braun killed."

"Yes, you could say he came up with an upgrade. Besides sounds, this beauty can show images. Like I said before, I couldn't get the damn sound part working; there's a crazy amount of interference in a single beam of sunlight thanks to pollution. The moon's brightness works better. We might not hear what's going on, but we sure as hell can see it. Spooky, uh?"

"Unnerving, yes."

"Hey," Mason said, noticing Abraham's wooden toolbox resting on the hangar's floor, "did you bring me something?"

"As a matter of fact, old friend," Abraham began, but he had to pause. The pain in his leg was taking a toll on him.

"You alright there, big man?"

“Yes, an old occupational wound, that’s all.” Mason laughed. “Tell me about it. Got any booze in there?”

“Better,” Abraham said, 1 “A problem that needs solving.”

Mason fished a silver cigarette case from between the loose screws, bolts, and custom watchmaker pliers that filled the front pocket of his apron. He opened the lid and pulled out a French chocolate-colored brand, “A problem, uh? Well, I’m good with problems.”

Abraham bent down and, from his toolbox, pulled the protective glasses and the fireproof glove. “Tell me something, Mason; can fire be made without oxygen?”

“No, that I know of.”

“Let me rephrase my question,” Abraham said, as he pulled out a black obsidian box the size of a matchbox, “can *you* make fire without oxygen?”

The old man’s lips split into a nasty grin, “Now that’s different.”

The bathroom on the second floor of the L’Ospedale di Santo Spirito was empty when Father Enzo Castiglione unzipped in front of the urinal. The bodyguards that accompanied him everywhere each time he left Vatican City had made sure of that. They were standing outside the bathroom when he cursed out loud at the shivering pain that trying to squeeze water from a rock brought him. The bodyguards didn’t bother to check on him; it wasn’t the first time they had to hear the man struggle with his prostate.

A cold breeze softly caressed his neck. Father Enzo turned his head to a row of four empty stalls and a closed door.

“For God’s sake, c’mon!” He muttered as he turned back to business.

“That’s a blasphemy, Father.” A voice behind him said.

Father Enzo turned his head again and got

startled. This time, Abraham was standing there.

“Oh, it’s just you.”

“I have a situation.”

“Don’t we all.”

Abraham didn’t answer that. Father Enzo leaned against the wall tiles to push stronger, but he only managed to squeeze a single drop that almost cost him his balance.

“What is it? What do you want?”

Next to his ear, Father Enzo saw Abraham’s brown leather glove handing him a folded piece of rectangular paper with the shield of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn hot-stamped on it.

Father Enzo sighed, straightened the paper, and moved it back and forth from his nose while narrowing his gaze. A single effort in vain was already too much for the old priest, so he handed Abraham the note back without turning. “I don’t have my glasses on me.”

“Put them on.”

“I have my—I’m busy here, damn you! Can’t you see I’m in the middle of something?”

A heavy hand knocked on the door. “Is everything okay in there, Father?”

“I’m fine! Don’t come in please, I’m almost done.”

“Very well.”

Abraham was waiting.

Grumbling something in Italian, Father Enzo fished out a golden custom made Derigo case from his jacket’s inner pocket and, helped by his teeth, unbuttoned it. Once he had his spectacles on, Abraham handed him the note again. Father Enzo snapped the paper out of his hands and began reading it.

A considerable time passed. Father Enzo had evidently read the note, which was barely a few sentences long. Still, he kept staring at it. He even turned it around to see if there was something he had missed on the back, but there wasn’t, so he turned it back around again and

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stared at it some more.

Finally, he handed the note back to Abraham.
“This, I cannot do.”

“I wasn’t expecting you to,” Abraham said.
Father Enzo paused, then shook his head,
“Cardinal Stefano won’t be able to help you
either.”

“I am aware of that.”

“Then I don’t know what to tell you. There’s
nobody else in the Church who—” Father
Enzo never finished the thought. He turned
his head to look into Abraham’s eyes but didn’t
like what he saw.

“Abraham, I can’t take this to the Holy
Father!”

“He can arrange it.”

Father Enzo laughed. It hurt. “Even if I was
crazy enough to pass this message to him, who
do you think we are, NASA? We can’t send
someone up there. Its madness. A complete
waste of time.”

“The Chinese can,” Abraham said.

“Go ask them then. I’m sure they can’t wait
to help you after your screwup in Kaifeng.”

“I’m asking you.”

Father Enzo was still smiling, but he was not
laughing anymore.

Abraham continued, “They have a new
mission scheduled soon. A maintenance crew
is due at the International Space Station next
month. I’m sure his Holiness can plan a short
visit to China for next week.”

Father Enzo shrugged. “It won’t happen.
The Holy Father can’t ask a government for
something like this. Don’t you understand? It’s
beyond his reach!”

“He has business with them.”

“So? The Holy Church has joint ventures
with everyone these days. We are interested in
space exploration, yes, but that doesn’t mean
we can just ask some foreign Nation to add an
extra passenger to one of their missions. I
mean, have you seen the Chuch’s observatory?

It’s the size of my kitchen, for God’s sake!”

Through the reflection of the bathroom tiles,
Father Enzo saw Abraham shaking his head, “I
never said anything about the Church, Father.”

The old priest froze. He had always known
Van Helsing had access to information that
would make J. Edgar Hoover’s files look like a
small town tabloid. This, though, was new to him.

“I see.”

“Did that surprised you?” Abraham said.

“It did, yes. That is twice you surprise me
Today.”

“Don’t feel too bad, Father. It is the fate of
every man who sits on the Throne of Saint
Peter to become corrupt. It is a sickness of the
soul.”

Father Enzo smiled to himself. “We took the
seminar together, did you know that?”

“Yes.”

“We never got to know each other that well.
There were many of us that year, but still...”

“It bothers you,” Abraham said. It was more
of a question than a statement.

“Of course it does.”

“Why?”

Father Enzo sighed, “When he got chosen--I
don’t know, the hopes and dreams of a foolish
man, I suppose.”

“It is never wrong to hope, Father.”

The old priest looked down and saw only
shame, “How sure are you?”

Abraham’s smile wasn’t broad and kind like
the priest’s; it was hard, crooked, a slit on his
face. To Abraham, there had always been a
certain twisted pleasure in witnessing the Faith
of man of the clergy crumble to pieces. “There
are two bank accounts under a real state
consortium in mainland China,” He said, “they
are both under his lover’s name. Some man
named Roberto.”

“Not that, damn you! About that... animale
being up there! How sure are you?”

“I saw it myself a few days ago. It’s up there.” His eyebrows came up slightly, “You saw it, how?”

Abraham knew the Church would chase Mason to the end of times if they found out the old man had a working prototype of Braun’s machine, so he did not answer that.

Father Enzo’s was the one smiling now, “You are a bigger pain than this damn prostate of mine, but I suppose it is one of those things I shouldn’t know about. Am I right?”

“You are.”

Father Enzo nodded to himself, then held the note up with two fingers. “Very well. Can you give me anything to convince him, besides this note?”

Abraham laughed a little, “Like what?”

“I don’t know, you tell me! We are not talking about a guided visit to the Vatican’s library here; what you ask is big! How do you expect his Holiness to convince the entire Chinese government of letting someone board one of their rockets?”

“Tell him to have faith, father.”

“Fai--?” Father Enzo was so close to a yell that he had to restrain himself until he could lower his voice, “Faith? Have you gone insane, man?”

“If that is not enough,” Abraham continued, “tell him to tell the Chinese I know why nobody comes back from the station. They can expect to have that little problem solved after I’m done.”

Father Enzo was already late for his medical appointment, and he hadn’t made much progress with his initial purpose when he first walked into the bathroom. He didn’t like it, but there was not much he could do, so he crumpled the paper in his hand until it was nothing but a ragged little ball, then stashed it away in his pocket.

“Very well,” Father Enzo said, making no effort into hiding his discontent, “I will pass

your message up the ranks. Someone will post an obituary with the usual codename on the L’Osservatore when it’s done—if it’s done,” He added.

“Thank you, Father, you have been most helpful.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Father Enzo said, raising his voice, “You just involved a government into our agreement. The veil will be off, Abraham. The Church will no longer be able to protect you.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Abraham said, “Oh, and Father...?”

“Yes?”

“Sorry about the Cancer.”

Father Enzo smiled, “Don’t be. It’s God’s will. We all have to go back to his side someday, right?”

But there was no answer. Abraham was no longer there when Father Enzo turned his head around.

The Chinese astronauts grappled and attached the Shuttle to the International Space Station with the precision of a team of brain surgeons, but they didn’t board it. They remained inside the cockpit, all four of them. Instead, it was Abraham who opened the outer hatch and propelled himself up the narrow circular corridor carrying his wooden toolbox with him. To the Chinese surprise, it hadn’t been the first time the Dutchman had been inside a spacesuit. He floated expertly until he reached the airlock of the Soyuz and connected his safety tether to one of the wall hooks.

He then began the procedure to open the airlock, first by pulling out a lever from the hatch with incredible difficulty. A thin layer of ice had been formed over it and was somewhat stuck. Then, once he managed to pull it out all the way, Abraham pumped the hydraulic system until the dim light on the door switched from a faint yellow to a bright green. Having

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dealt with Russian engineers and their excessive attention to detail many times in his life, Abraham kept pumping the lever a few more times, just to be on the safe side. Once he was done, he put the lever back in place and pulled the airlock open.

No oxygen left the Space Station. A quick glance into the interior told him why. It seemed the creature had decided to pierce with a fist one of the walls of the Service Section long ago, suffocating everyone inside. Abraham pushed his wooden toolbox into the dimly lit crawlspace, then he floated himself there, closing the hatch behind him.

A bright light coming from the US Lab Module caught his attention. He made his way to the main airlock through frozen chunks of meat that floated aimlessly in the macabre slaughterhouse. When he arrived there, Abraham saw horror as he had not seen in a long time.

The creature had been busy experimenting with the astronauts' remains in ways that even the most experienced pathologist would find repugnant. It had been, without doubt, trying to reproduce itself, unsuccessfully.

Shocked, Abraham put down his toolbox and removed his helmet. The creature was holding a scalpel like a child holds a toy; it unsettled him. He had caught it doing something to one of the astronaut's exposed brains, and it was clearly startled as it didn't expect any visits. Not up there.

Even though he was well aware of the intricacies of contemporary technology, in many ways, Abraham was still a man of the last days of the 18th century. He tried to speak in the vacuum of the space, where no sound can travel. The creature stared at him, intrigued. It did not take long for Abraham to realize the futile of his efforts, though. He found one of the many station controls on the wall, then hooked to the communication systems

through an auxiliary cord he pulled from within his spacesuit. He was about to signal the creature to grab one of the dead astronaut's caps and put it on so it could listen to him, but the beast was already holding one next to its ear when he looked up again.

"Put the blade down and stop desecrating those men, damn you." He ordered.

At first, the creature didn't answer back; it just stared at the Dutchman's face for a long while. He couldn't tell by the thing's lack of reaction if it was simply surprised by seeing someone up there or if it had actually recognized him.

That is when it spoke.

To say its voice was the sound one can expect being howled from the throat of a dead man would be to put it too simply. It was the voice of something else. It was the voice of the combination of all the hate, the sorrow, the shame of an entire species. It was the voice of stupidity, of arrogance, of every sacrilegious misdeed the human race has punished itself with over the countless centuries. The thing had the voice of a man.

"Do I know you?"

Even though the sound of the beast's voice came somewhat distorted through the communication system, each word revolted Abraham's stomach, "You have no right to refer to yourself in first person, monster!" He said.

"I do know you. Your voice, your face; they seem... familiar."

"No, you don't know me. But I know you. Now, do as I say and put the blade down. Those were men, they had families, you have no right--"

"Right?" The creature said, "I have every right!"

Abraham couldn't help looking away; there was a twisted stare in the creature's eyes that spoke of pride, satisfaction. "How the hell did you get up here?" Abraham said, looking at the

naked bodies nailed to the floor like a dissected frogs.

“I am smart.”

“Smart?” Abraham said, “You call this being smart?”

The creature leaned a little closer. “I could not finish my work down there. Running, being hunted all the time. Too many interruptions. So I found a way to get up here. The stupid men, they never saw me get into their rocket. I’m good at staying hidden. I had to become good at it. Here, I have everything I need and cannot be interrupted.”

Abraham said, “Until now.”

The creature waited. It had the calm stare of a baby being put into his cradle, yet, he wore a mask made of hate.

“Yes, until now.”

“Victor Frankenstein was...” Abraham began. He paused, looking for the right words.

“My father.” The creature suggested.

“Men have fathers!” Abraham said, “Animals have fathers! You, you are a thing, a beast! A mistake. Something that shouldn’t be. No, he wasn’t your father; he was your creator. He was also a brilliant, unique man with a great mind. Don’t you dare to taint his good name by calling yourself his son, you brute!”

“He wanted me to be his son.”

“What man would want such a thing? What man would! Look at you!”

The creature seemed unaffected by the Dutchman’s words.

“No, monster,” Abraham said, feeling pity for mankind as he hadn’t before, “He never wanted to father a thing as disgusting as you. He was after the divine. Creation, using only science. You are merely the punishment for his heresy.”

“Only science?” The creature’s question was filled with hope. It gave Abraham shivers.

“I thought you were smart. There are other ways to reanimate the dead. Many, in fact.”

The creature’s eyes widened, but before it could say anything, Abraham began to shake his head. “No, I won’t show you how. It wouldn’t help you achieve what you seek anyway.”

“Why not.”

“There is an order in life, damn you; those who are brought back from the other side serve a master. Victor did not want to reanimate dead tissue. He wanted to create life, but instead, he corrupted it.”

“Is that what you do? Serve a master?” The creature said.

Abraham bent down to open his toolbox. “No. But I did, once, for a short while. Thanks to the man whose flesh Frankenstein profaned from his family vault to shape you, beast, I don’t anymore.”

“You call me a beast, but there is no air in here, yet, you removed your helmet, and unlike the others, you live.”

Abraham began sliding drawers and trays in his toolbox.

“Breathing and being alive is not always the same. See, many, many years ago, I was involved in a terrible accident. During a fight, I ended up with gangrene on the left leg. John Seward, the man whose flesh you are wearing like a Halloween mask, sucked out the poisoned blood out of me.”

“It was not poison,” the creature said. Its eyes, seeing images that weren’t there a minute before.

“No, it wasn’t. I was turned into a Nosophoros, a creature of the dead. The Chinese called them Jiangshi, the Romanian Nosferatu, or Vampir, depending on the region. But I died. Life left me. For a short while, I was a slave. Neither alive nor dead, but with a thirst unlike any other. John saved me from that fate when he sucked out the blood from the wound. A moment later, and it would have been too late.”

“But he became ill,” the creature said, still

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searching for vague images in his mind, “we both did—I mean, he and you.”

Abraham pulled out a set of brass tools wrapped in a velvet cloth from the toolbox and put them aside. “Yes, part of the curse remained in me, as it did in John.”

“I know some of this. I can see... moments. Hear sounds. You were a teacher. He respected you greatly.”

“Echos, from a past that doesn’t belong to you, monster. You see, Victor Frankenstein was a brilliant young man, but he was no genius, and he was misguided. He believed life—creation was something you could put in a jar, make out by mixing chemicals under a Bunsen burner. He was an ignorant man, in that regard.”

The creature began to laugh. The sound it made was unbearable. It was the sound of dead laughing, the sound of glass being scratched.

“Stop that, you demon!” Abraham demanded.

“My father was the most intelligent man that existed. He alone became a God. Look at me, I do not exist, then?”

“He was ignorant! This proves it!” Abraham said, pointing at the operation table where the creature had been tirelessly trying to make itself a partner. “You mutilated these men flesh, their genitalia, why? To make yourself a bride? A companion?”

“A partner,” the creature said, grimly.

“There will never be any partners for you, monster! You cannot be loved; look at you! You are a creature, an abomination! A caricature of a man! Look at what you have done to these people; what woman could possibly love that?”

“My father said it could be done.”

“Victor was a child playing with his father’s gun, and he got himself shot in the heart the day he spat you into this world. I’m here to put an end to his tragedy once and for all.”

Abraham pulled a metallic canister from his toolbox. On the center, there was a small oval slit of thick opaque glass from where one could see a shapeless, red stone of the size of an American quarter floating inside. At moments, it seemed to pulsate with eagerness.

“You came here to kill me?” the creature said.

“Kill you? You are not alive, damn you! This is not life; it’s a mistake!”

“Wrong!” the creature yelled, the bony claw it had for hand gripping the head of one of the astronauts, “You are wrong! I deserve to be alive more than you, or any of them!”

Abraham quickly grabbed the canister with both hands.

“I am a miracle,” The creature said, its voice barely forming human words.

Abraham was so disgusted by the creature’s reasoning that he couldn’t hide his discontent and spat on the floor. “Some miracle you are. Killing hundreds, mutilating dozens, playing with men’s flesh like a child plays with mud.”

“My father made life from the dead. I watched him, and I learned. I memorized everything he did. I am his only son; I have the same power within me.”

“It was a mistake, don’t you see?” Abraham said, “Or are you blind besides being stupid? Victor Frankenstein was a brilliant man, but he never created life! It was an accident! A terrible joke of destiny.”

“He spent years—”

“Yes, he spent years failing! Because it can’t be done, nor with science or magic! Man can’t be God, as much as it wants to. Don’t you see it? He used John’s body to make you. His flesh was cursed, just as mine is. It wasn’t his rubber tubes and alchemy potions that brought you here, beast; it was me! My mistake!”

The creature looked at him with a peculiar stare in his watery, bulging eyes. It attempted to say something, but memories came faster than the words did.

"There was... a young girl. We were trying to save her."

The creature nodded as if the memory was being played like a movie in front of it. "You lowered your guard for a moment," it said, "a gas lamp fell. There was a fire. Confusion. Smoke."

Abraham nodded. "A Nosferatu bit me. John, he saved me just in time, but there were consequences. Part of the curse that is keeping me here passed onto him when he sucked my wound."

"He never aged after that. Neither of us did. We remained as we were that night, with one foot here, another on the other side. He died, eventually, after many, many years. But whatever was Victor Frankenstein thought he accomplished, it wasn't because of his work. It was because he used John's body. It is the only reason why you exist, creature. It is why you have his memories."

The creature began mumbling something into the microphone, then kept quiet. Its eyes going from the strange canister Abraham was holding to his eyes and back to the canister again.

"This?" Abraham said, noticing the creature's silent inquiry, "This here is the only one of its kind, just like we. It is a petrified piece of the lung of a man called Denwen. The ancient Egyptians regarded him as a God because he could breathe fire, but he was no deity; there was nothing divine in him as there is nothing divine in your existence. He was just an old priest who toyed with things he could not fully understand. In a way, he was Victor Frankenstein before Victor Frankenstein existed."

"What are you going to do with it?"

Abraham held it up in front of him, so the creature could see the strange, shapeless nugget that floated inside. "Well, back on earth, it is rather harmless, unless it is mixed with oxygen that is, in which case it burns anything

it comes into contact with."

The creature's eyes were narrow now, filled with hate. It knew its enemy.

"The fire the Denwen Stone produces, it cannot be put out. Ever. It consumes everything around it and keeps consuming and feeding itself of whatever its flames come across with. Hence, the enclosed compartment."

A crooked smile slowly split the creature's blackened lips into a very horrendous grin. "Fire can't exist without oxygen," it said, taking short steps towards Abraham.

"No, it cannot. That is why it sits in a cloud of chlorine trifluoride."

The creature stopped cold. Its eyes widened.

"I see some of John's memories are still there," Abraham said, "Pity. You could have used his knowledge of human anatomy to realize that what you are doing here, you monster, is nothing but an act of madness. Yes, thanks to this contraption a friend of mine built, the Denwen Stone will burn, even here, in space."

The creature took a step back, but there wasn't anywhere else to go anymore.

"No more running," Abraham said.

"I am the closest thing your kind will ever be from becoming divine. You end me here, now, and that will also die with me."

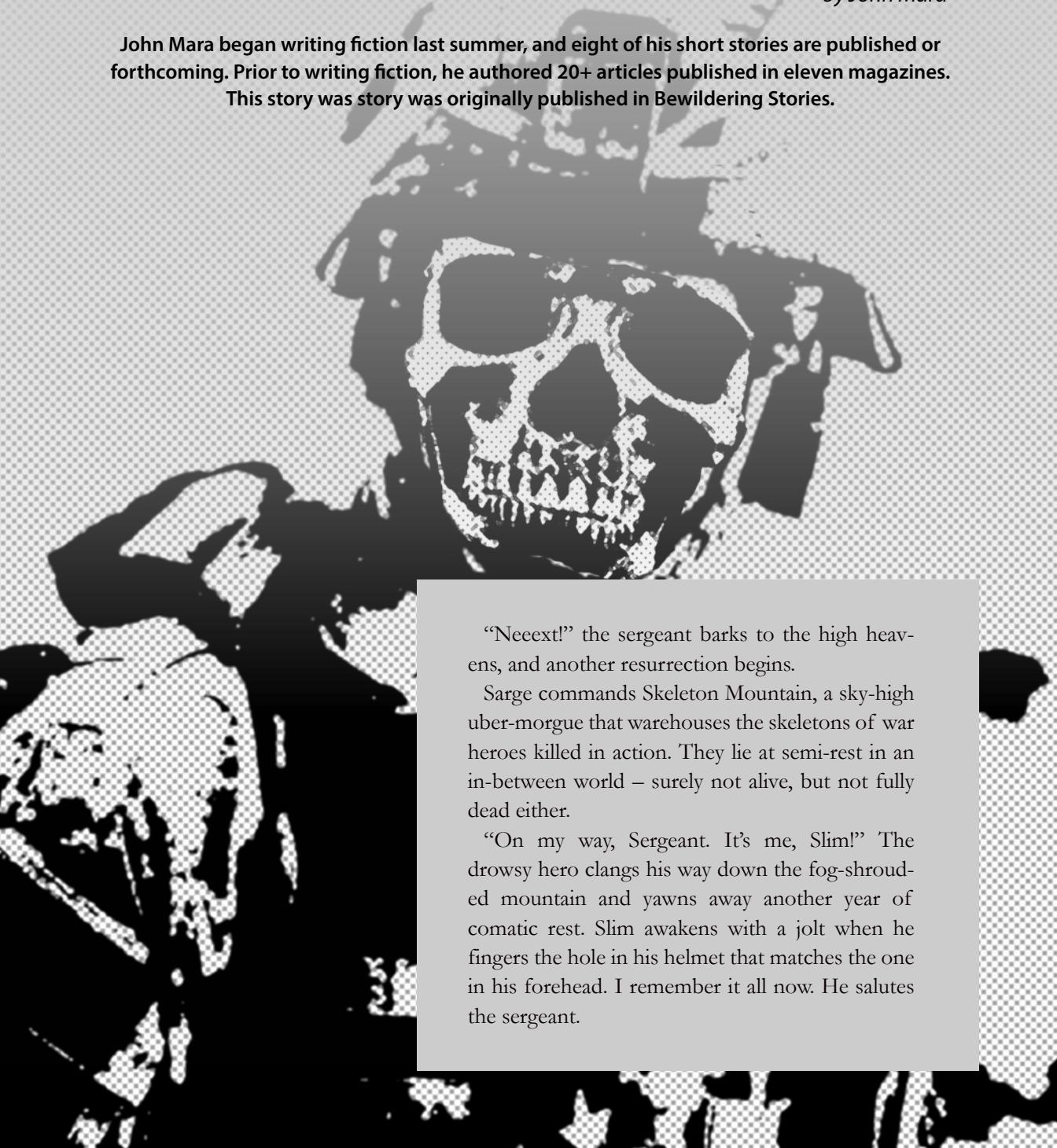
Abraham didn't bother to continue with the conversation; it disgusted him. And as the creature caught fire and contorted itself in agony, he disconnected his communication cord from the wall outlet to avoid listening to the thing screams of rage and horror. He simply sat on the plastic floor of the celestial tomb Prometheus built to watch its creation burn to coal and ashes.

The Skeleton's Scrapbook

by John Mara

John Mara began writing fiction last summer, and eight of his short stories are published or forthcoming. Prior to writing fiction, he authored 20+ articles published in eleven magazines.

This story was originally published in *Bewildering Stories*.



“Neeext!” the sergeant barks to the high heavens, and another resurrection begins.

Sarge commands Skeleton Mountain, a sky-high uber-morgue that warehouses the skeletons of war heroes killed in action. They lie at semi-rest in an in-between world – surely not alive, but not fully dead either.

“On my way, Sergeant. It’s me, Slim!” The drowsy hero clangs his way down the fog-shrouded mountain and yawns away another year of comatic rest. Slim awakens with a jolt when he fingers the hole in his helmet that matches the one in his forehead. I remember it all now. He salutes the sergeant.

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"At ease, private," Sarge says. "It's 2020. Welcome to your annual resurrection day – courtesy of the U.S. Army."

"Any news on my girl Jo?" It's Slim's top-of-skull question at his every rising. "And what about my buddy Boomer?"

"Hey, that's not for us to know," Sarge says.

"They're in the real world."

"I'll find out one way or another." What Slim really wants to know is whether Jo ever got married after he took the bullet.

"You're on the clock, soldier!" Sarge says. He flips over an hourglass and checks off Slim's name in his census book. "Congrats, pal! Says here it's your tenth resurrection."

Ten years ago, during the war in Afghanistan, Slim was killed when he stepped in front of a bullet aimed at Boomer. Slim's valor earned him a posthumous Distinguished Service Cross – and a ticket into the army's in-between world.

Sarge hands Slim a scrapbook: What Would've Been. The army keeps the scrapbook current and lets Slim read it every year. "Happy reminiscing."

As a preamble to his life that would've been, the scrapbook begins with a 2010 newspaper account of Slim's real life demise. The Springville Sentinel features a photo of Slim's flag-draped coffin. Then, Boomer, Slim's best buddy in his unit, describes for the reporter:

... The Taliban forces ambushed our outfit as we maneuvered back to base camp. When Slim rose up to pull me down into our foxhole, he caught one from a sniper's high-powered rifle right between the eyes, helmet and all...

The article later tells of Boomer's fate:

... Because Slim pulled Boomer to safety, Boomer took only a glancing blow off his helmet. But that same bullet killed Slim.

That moment snuffed out Slim's future with Jo, a neighborhood girl back home. Boomer returned home with a dented helmet and a war

story to tell.

"Enjoying the ride, private?" Sarge asks.

Slim turns the page. "I just read about my own assassination and funeral – for the tenth time!" Slim laments. "And you call that some kind of annual military honor?"

"Remember, the fully dead read nothing," Sarge says.

After the scrapbook's gruesome preamble, Slim's life that would've been starts with a letter from Jo. He never got to read it in real life, because the hole in his head arrived before the letter did. The letter's finale would've stopped Slim's heart, had it kept on beating:

... I want us to start the rest of our lives together, from the day you come home, because I will love you always,

Your Jo

Slim broods over the engagement ring he still hides in his uniform pocket. He would've slipped it onto Jo's finger the next day. "I was heading home to you, Jo," he reminds the ring. "One godforsaken day short of heaven." Jo's letter torments him every year.

The scrapbook carries him further into his life that's not going on: announcements of his 2011 marriage to Jo and the births of their two children. Slim takes a somber interest in the latest year of updates, and Sarge angles in for the news, too. "See here, Sarge? Paintings by Little Jo! And Slim Jr. He plays my trumpet now!" Slim is engrossed in the new mementos, when suddenly the scrapbook slams itself shut.

"Aww, Sarge, I always want to see just one more page."

"Private, never fear," Sarge says. "That book will be a whole year fatter for your 2021 rising."

Slim drops the scrapbook on Sarge's desk with a bang.

"Your time's racin' by like a freight train, soldier!" Sarge says. He signals two lifeless

forms hovering in the fog. “Let’s just stick with the army’s program.”

The spectres drift toward Slim. They look like disembodied copies of the photos of Little Jo and Slim Jr. in the scrapbook. The spectres recoil when they see the hole in their father’s forehead. They were on a glide path to join the living world. But the hole intervened, and they landed in the would’ve been world instead.

Slim remembers the vacant look in their eyes. When he strokes their cheeks, he finds clammy vapor. His arms flail right through their mist when he tries to hug them. My children always look and feel like cold death!

But Slim notices something different this year – a lock of hair – that floats with Slim Jr. as part of his spectre. He recognizes Jo’s scent in it. He palms the hair as best he can to conceal it from the ever-vigilant sergeant. Sarge watches Slim closely, because Slim is always on the lookout for a path like this one off of Skeleton Mountain.

“Time’s up! Your rising’s over!” Sarge brandishes the empty hourglass. A sudden breeze whisks the spectres away, and they evaporate into the fog.

“Chin up, private,” Sarge says. “The army always brings ‘em back, like clockwork.”

“How do they access the real world, Sarge? Jo helps them. I know she does!”

“Whoa, whoa! The real world’s not my gig.”

“And exactly what world is your gig?”

Sarge leans in confidentially. “Okay, kid, here’s what the big brass told me when I trained for this desk job. They started me out with the world that really was and the world that really is.”

“A real past and a real present. It’s not quantum physics.”

“But then the big brass sprung a third dimension on me: the world that would’ve been.”

“Where’d they find that one, Sarge?”

“A buncha physicists from the Manhattan

Project discovered this third dimension during World War II. And that’s when the army built Skeleton Mountain. Since then, the army sends every military member killed in combat here. All you Afghan War heroes have your own wing, and I run it.”

“A wing? It’s a quantum physics experiment, don’t you see? And we’re the army’s guinea pigs!”

“All right, Skeleton Mountain is an unearthly place, I admit. But it’s better than being fully dead. Besides, these risings are a military honor.”

“An honor? A rising? They’re an annual crucifixion! Followed by a coma! In a murky purgatory! Be fully alive or be fully dead, I say. How do I punch a ticket outta this netherworld, anyhow?”

“How do I know? The army built it, and I just run the risings — on time, on schedule. And time’s up!” Sarge marks a new name in his census book and looks up to the heavens. “Neeext!” This time, the sergeant over-tilts his chair, and his bones spill onto the ground.

Sarge has his guard down for the first time in the ten years he’s had the job. Slim sees the chance he’s always waited for to bug out. As Sarge rolls and curses behind his desk, Slim snags the scrapbook and clanks his bones after the two spectres. “Wish me luck, Sarge. I might even find Jo!” Slim shouts. “Besides, a soldier only lives once. The army can’t take any more skin off my bones.”

Sarge waits for Slim to escape into the fog, and then he collects himself from his supposed tumble. “I just had to let that skinny grunt follow that lock of hair.” He removes the green eyeshade he wears to hide the hole in his forehead. “With the skin off my bones, good ol’ Slim never did know I was his sergeant in Afghanistan and died in his foxhole.”

In the living world, Boomer moans, “Look

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out! Duuuck! . . . Oh God, no!"

Jo sits up in bed to help calm Boomer's sweaty nightmare. "Is it the foxhole again, Boomer?"

"Ya, all of it." His heart races, but the Boomer always keeps his macho on. "That sniper bastard, the helmets, and then, ya know . . . what's left of Slim." What happened in the foxhole in 2010 has been eating Boomer alive for ten years. After his most recent foxhole hallucinations, Jo wants Boomer to see a therapist. But he's too much of a real man to talk it out.

Boomer rolls over and tries to sleep, but the ghastly foxhole images make his head throb. "Ah, what's the use?" He lumbers out of the bedroom.

"Good. This year he won't be stalking me," Jo says. Her own images will come to her, too, right at midnight. Tonight's the peak energy night.

Boomer retreats to the den, his private world, where Jo never sets foot. He finds the darkness soothing, so he dials down the lights. Trophies crowd all of the shelves. His "Boomer" moniker came from the way he carried the football – "Boom! Quick as a cat!" – And his army munitions exploits made the tag stick.

He heads to the liquor cart and pours a tall bourbon, straight up. The bottle has been his new best friend ever since Slim caught the bullet. The whiskey keeps at bay the sniper living in his head. "A drink beats a shrink," he says. In Boomer's world, the bottle listens just fine.

He gets his army revolver from under the couch. He cocks the hammer and puts the gun to his forehead. He grins, and then he fills the grin with the gun barrel. He's watched a few vets escape this way from their troubled worlds. But not Boomer. "See?" he says to the gun. "I'm in complete control."

The sniper's bullet deflected off Boomer's

helmet and hit Slim ten years ago tonight. Boomer recalls delivering Slim back home to Springville in a box. It was his duty. Leave no man behind. He comforted Slim's devastated parents. He met Jo, of course, and consoled her. She became depressed, stunned into inaction. They shared stories about Slim. Boomer helped her recover, and Jo warmed to him more every day.

Boomer the city boy never left Springville. "Ten years later, here I am, married to my army buddy's sweetheart." Boomer wants a couple of kids, but Jo insists on birth control. "We've got half a marriage. But how do I fix it?" The bottle has no answers for Boomer.

Boomer's head still pounds, but he's exhausted. "Long day tomorrow." He still works for the army when he's able, helping returned Afghan War vets put aside the war demons in their heads. If they only knew about the demons in Boomer's head.

He pours back a nightcap, and then he climbs under a blanket on the couch. The Boomer escapes into a restless sleep.

Jo, too, climbs out of bed at the stroke of midnight, right on Boomer's heels. She slinks past the den just as Boomer pours his bourbon. She makes her way to the study, her private workspace. She locks the door behind her and heads straight for the dusty trumpet mounted over the mantle. From inside its bell, she retrieves the letter from Slim that arrived the day he was shot. It ends:

... Be ready for a small surprise, Jo. I want us to start the rest of our lives together.

*I will love you always,
Your Slim*

What might've been with Slim? Was it a rebound thing with Boomer? More recently, Jo's been weighing, Should I roll the dice and

change all of our worlds?

Jo looks outside into the fog, and two apparitions capture her attention. An obscure force rattles the window. The fog billows into the study when she opens it, and two small spectral shapes appear. They don't speak, but they flare wide smiles, happy for even a brief moment with their mother in her world.

"Yes, their human sentience has progressed nicely," Jo says. Their blue eyes now have a lustrous quality, and their flowing hair has taken on the color of Jo's. Jo caresses their smooth skin, and then she embraces them both. "The DNA mutations are working."

Jo conducts her gene therapy procedures in a lab at the state university. Ten years ago, she changed her college major to study quantum physics and genomics. Today, she does grant-funded research in these fields. But she may be going too far: her university colleagues fear her recent work oversteps ethical boundaries.

With time short, Jo stays on task. She injects each of the spectres with one syringe, and then she draws their bodily fluid with another. She'll extract their DNA and resequence it in time for next year's life-regenerating injections.

With the syringe work complete, a larger spectre floats through the window on Little Jo's signal. "That lock of hair did the trick," Jo says. Slim's ethereal form swirls when she tries to embrace him. She sobs instead until she gasps for air, elated to access him finally in any stage of non-death.

Jo remembers the limited time and gathers herself. She waves a test tube through Slim's spectre to capture a sample of his misty essence. Even in his primitive state, she'll extract enough genome to begin his DNA editing. "But Slim's DNA will take years to catch up – a lifetime," she says. "Unless I somehow accelerate his treatments."

As Jo expects, the spectral forms begin to

dissipate, and her three visitors waft out of the window. The child spectres try to pull Jo with them into their dimension, but their peak energy drains all too quickly. The breeze dissolves them into the night.

At the window, Jo notices a scrapbook the spectres left behind. She settles under a blanket on the couch to read it. The scrapbook takes her on a journey into a world that should have been. "It still can be," she says.

When she closes the window, Jo sees the engagement ring that was left under the scrapbook. She thumbs through the scrapbook again while she contemplates the ring. "I do, Slim," she finally decides. She slips on the ring. "I would've said it in 2010, and I say it now. I do."

"It's time to change the game," she says. Jo has formulated a new, risky method to connect quantum worlds. If successful, it would unite her should-be family for ongoing DNA treatments. With Slim's ring on her finger, she has no choice but to try her controversial procedure. "Nursemaid ethics be damned. All of our worlds are at stake." Whether it works or not, she'll at least escape the ten years of her make-believe life with Boomer.

The rising sun awakens Boomer. He drags himself out of his private world and back to the bedroom for a little extra sleep. Jo's not there. But he's not worried; Jo often reads in the study when she can't sleep.

He goes to the study and tries the door. It's locked. "Jo?" he calls. No answer. The Boomer busts open the door with a single shoulder thrust, and a breeze rushes through the open window.

A blanket lies crumpled on the couch with a scrapbook set on top of it. The bookcase that held all of her research material is empty. Even that rusty old trumpet is gone.

He reads a note taped to the front of the

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scrapbook. It ends:

... It's time our lives take on a new dimension. Read the scrapbook, and you'll understand.

Goodbye Boomer.

Jo

The note puzzles Boomer. He looks out of the window, but the rising sun blinds him. He sees nothing.

Boomer brings the scrapbook back to his den and searches for more clues about Jo's disappearance. He shudders when he sees his wife's 2011 wedding portrait. "It can't be!" Yes, he recognizes Jo's wedding gown, but he's the best man. And the groom? "It's Slim!" He needs help from his friend, so he fills a tumbler. He flips the pages with his eyes popping. "There's Slim and Jo. With two kids! Visiting me in the city!" He finishes the scrapbook – and the tumbler. "I can't go on with Jo, not now."

He closes his eyes and breathes deeply, meditatively. Boomer's back in the foxhole with Slim. His head spins from the whiskey and so does the foxhole. Slim spins to his left and then switches back to his right, over and over. Boomer's eyes flash open with an epiphany: "Switch!" The bottle has shown him a perfectly simple solution. Had Slim been to his left in the foxhole, rather than to his right, their fates would've switched, too, when the sniper's bullet arrived.

Boomer knows what he needs to do. He can step aside to let Jo and Slim make their What Would've Been scrapbook real. Ten years of undisclosed pain pour out of him. Boomer cries uncontrollably and then laughs breathlessly until he hyperventilates. He crushes the tumbler and slashes his hand, and then takes his revenge by heaving the liquor cart. He's lost his grip. The Boomer's a bloody madman.

He joins a few chairs in a huddle and calls the reverse switchback play he mastered in his

football days: "One, two, switcheroo." He cradles his old army helmet like a football. Boomer cuts sloppily to his left and then switches back to his right, over and over, as he chants wildly, "One!-two!-switch-er-oo!"

He puts on the helmet and rubs the dent in it with a newfound perspective on life, death, and the space in between. He pulls on his old Afghan War uniform and then burrows behind the couch. Slim is to his right, as on that fateful day. He reaches for the revolver, his salvation. He knows it's the salvation of Jo and Slim, too. He'll be six feet under – six feet out of their way.

Boomer runs his signature play. He pops his head up on the left and then switches back to the right, over and over. He flares a wide, crazed grin. The switch worked! Slim is now safe on his left, and he's on the fateful right. All of their worlds are about to change. He tucks the gun just beneath his helmet. "Boom!" The cat's not so quick any more.

Back in the in-between world, Sarge tidies his desk to kick off a new day of military precision. He still chuckles about the fugitive skeleton he let get away. He cashed in some favors with the army brass for them to overlook his indiscretion. "There goes that promotion." Sarge nearly ended up on the mountain himself.

Just then, a bewildered skeleton materializes out of the fog. "Ah, a new customer. Good for business." He enters the name 'Unknown' in the census book. "No dog tags, no name. Them's army regulations."

The new skeleton cradles his helmet like a football and begins his slow trek up Skeleton Mountain. The Switcheroo Kid got more than the six feet he bargained for. Unknown climbs into his assigned location: the former resting place of good ol' Slim in the Afghanistan War wing. "Good for Slim," Sarge says. "The army

brass must figure he won't be back."

It's time for Sarge to start the day's resurrections, but something about Unknown has him baffled. "That new hero has a neat hole in his forehead," he says. "So how come there's only a dent in his helmet?"

Another helmet on his desk – the one Slim left behind when he scrambled – catches his attention. He does a double take. "Can't be." His eye sockets bulge. "It's gone!" He rubs the spot where, for ten years running, there's been a fatal bullet hole. In its place, Slim's helmet now sports only a dent. "With no bullet hole there . . . Slim never would've detoured here!" To check his reasoning, Sarge frantically searches the census book for Slim's name. "It's gone too!"

The paradox of the two helmets wholly befuddles the sergeant. He wants to solve the mystery, but all the distractions have him late getting the risings started. He flips over the hourglass instead and looks to the high heavens. "Neeext!"

Back in Springville, Jo hugs her husband to begin another ordinary day. "Remind your parents, hon. They've got both kids next weekend."

"Why?" Slim says.

Don't you remember? It'll be our ninth wedding anniversary!"

"Oh yeah," Slim says. "Then that reminds me. I'll be home late tonight."

"Why?"

"I'm attending evening Mass after work. My army buddy died in a foxhole ten years ago today."

"That was sad," Jo says. "I never got to meet him. What was his name again?"

"He blew things up. We called him the Boomer."



Hi there! Love the magazine!

First of all, I would like to start by saying "THANK YOU" for doing such a great job with the magazine. I was hoping I could read it from my Kindle and now all I have to do is push a button. So, again, thank you.

Now; I'm writing because (as far as I know) there are only a handful of films about writing. One I've enjoyed very much is "Finding Forrester". Do you happen to know of any other films in that same style?

Again, thank you!

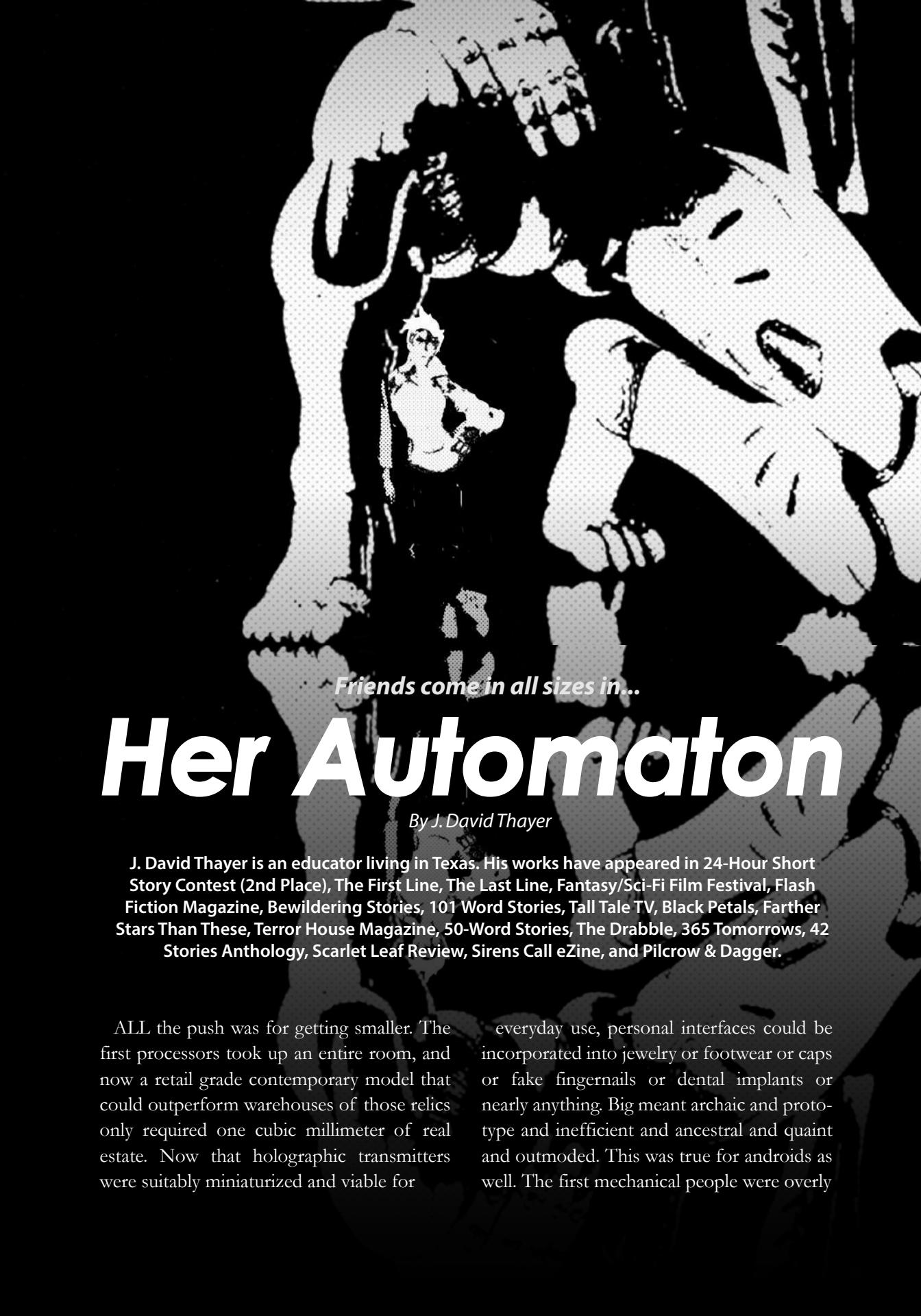
Sophia Davison,
Alberta, CA.

Dear Sophia,

You are welcome! Finding Forrester must be among our favorite movies about writers. If you really enjoy the genre, then I have to suggest "Midnight at Paris", by Woody Allen. You will find this movie, along with one Al Pacino directed called "Chinese Coffee", are among the best writers can expect to watch about their profession.

Please make sure to share this month's magazine; we can use your help!

Thanks for writing, and thanks for reading!



Friends come in all sizes in...

Her Automaton

By *J. David Thayer*

J. David Thayer is an educator living in Texas. His works have appeared in 24-Hour Short Story Contest (2nd Place), The First Line, The Last Line, Fantasy/Sci-Fi Film Festival, Flash Fiction Magazine, Bewildering Stories, 101 Word Stories, Tall Tale TV, Black Petals, Farther Stars Than These, Terror House Magazine, 50-Word Stories, The Drabble, 365 Tomorrows, 42 Stories Anthology, Scarlet Leaf Review, Sirens Call eZine, and Pilcrow & Dagger.

ALL the push was for getting smaller. The first processors took up an entire room, and now a retail grade contemporary model that could outperform warehouses of those relics only required one cubic millimeter of real estate. Now that holographic transmitters were suitably miniaturized and viable for

everyday use, personal interfaces could be incorporated into jewelry or footwear or caps or fake fingernails or dental implants or nearly anything. Big meant archaic and prototype and inefficient and ancestral and quaint and outmoded. This was true for androids as well. The first mechanical people were overly

large and clunky and exceedingly deliberate. But visit a synthetic life dealership today and the most expensive models are three-quarter human size. Elegant and graceful. Stronger than primates and faster than great cats and each successive generation is exponentially more advanced than the last. And smaller. Always getting smaller. But Maneesk didn't care a hoot about any of that.

Her Beynart was big. Fully erect the early robot stood thirty feet tall. He was an original Optiplex 5, manufactured forty-two years ago and long forgotten in the age of small. Now, thanks to more than three years of searching and scrounging and collecting and replacing and modifying and installing and retrofitting, Beynart was fully restored. The only working Optiplex 5 on Vatista. He was so incredibly big, Maneesk could open a door tucked behind his left ear and walk right inside his head. Inside was a command console for her to sit behind, as if she were controlling Beynart's movements by manipulating a series of pedals and levers and switches and stops and buttons, but there was no such functionality. The Optiplex 5s were equipped with this curious alcove purportedly to aide with childcare. The various controls were merely unconvincing props in a playhouse. Such myopic thinking was now incomprehensible. Why go through so much trouble and wasted bulk just to foster frivolous imagination? Thankfully, such grotesque sentimentality had long been extinguished. But Maneesk was soul out of time, and his head was her favorite room in fact.

Maneesk loved sitting behind that ridiculous faux bridge and looking out through Beynart's massive portal eyes at the neighborhood down below. Everyday she stomped him down the sidewalk and giggled all the while. Maneesk even played with the props exactly as they were intended. She imagined herself wielding the automaton's galvanized limbs, pulling on the

oversized handles equipped with exaggerated clicking noises and twisting the ratchety knobs as if every decision she made were necessary to goad the lumbering metal Goliath down the street. But make believe was all this was. Beynart was in full control of his movements and even his mute thoughts. When not indulging such silliness, the bridge and captain's chair offered a comfortable seat in which Maneesk could ride along as a passenger. Now that Beynart was fully ambulatory, she rode her robot everywhere. The neighbors scoffed at his largeness and his antiquity and her odd obsession with things obsolete and Maneesk didn't give a hoot about any of that either.

Hailfed was Maneesk's husband. He worked as lead monorail architect in Calupet City Planning. A brilliant mind for bridges. He was irreplaceable in his field and he was well compensated. Maths and schematics he understood but relationships and people were a continuing mystery. Their needs and expectations and all of the subtleties. Maneesk understood him. She knew that careful and exact routines helped Hailfed function. Objects out of place brought him distress, so she worked hard to keep his environment free of disorder. Hailfed understood Maneesk too, after his own fashion. He communicated his love for her in a language all his own. Maneesk couldn't speak it, but she did understand it. And she received it. She knew when Hailfed spent his weekend debugging Beynart's central positronic processor, he was actually showing her affection. His investment in Beynart was meant to be an investment in Maneesk. Hailfed knew how much Maneesk loved Beynart and he knew he could help set him right again. Even better than his date of manufacture. When words were difficult to find, Hailfed could always talk about new ideas for Beynart restoration. Maneesk understood this substitution also.

“Great idea, honey! I love you too.”

HER AUTOMATON

Maneesk and Hailfed had each other and they had Beynart and that robot was almost a surrogate offspring. But not quite. Beynart was certainly her automaton and was not their automaton. What Beynart and Hailfed shared was a love for Maneesk that both understood separately and which neither could articulate. And they understood each other but neither could they articulate that fact. But this was fine because Maneesk talked more than enough for all three. If it needed to be said, she said it. If it didn't need to be said, Maneesk made doubly sure to say it just to model best practices. Not a traditional family but a family notwithstanding. A man, a wife, and the wife's automaton. A wobbly yet perfect balance. It worked.

When the invaders came to Vatista they were small. Fragile cephalopods whose skulls would crack under a single punch. But they were much too clever to fight the Vatistans directly, so the Vatistans never had a chance. Instead they butchered ordinary Vatistan civilians and transformed them into killers. They targeted arenas during sporting events. Ships collected above stadiums and captured spectators with paralyzing beams of unknown technology. Then swarms of surgical robots set about amputating limbs and impaling stumps with prosthetic weaponry and more efficient means of travel. Instantly mindless and void of memory. Legions of ordinary citizens with grafted laser canons set loose to slaughter the populace. The cyborg Vatistans eradicated what used to be their own species with breathtaking efficiency. And the new infantry was disposable. The cephalopod implants were toxic by design, and not a single drone soldier lived more than a few hours after conscription. But that was plenty long enough. Once a campaign began, the entire city was razed to the ground by nightfall. Dawn at the latest. Eventually the invasion reached Calupet City.

Maneesk was sitting behind the toy bridge

when the first wave of her cyborg neighbors began swarming the streets like merciless and organized hornets. Beynart stood in their backyard with his massive head positioned over the housetop. A place of temporary safety. Maneesk ran up to the plate glass portal of Beynart's left eye. Citizens dying everywhere, shot by other modified citizens now without the will to resist. Breathtaking precision. Some residents had taken to the streets armed with whatever makeshift weaponry they could grab in that instant and these were murdered at exactly the same rate. To watch was to abandon all hope. Maneesk lost her breath and could barely steady herself against to portal. Horror and sobbing and then she remembered Hailfed.

Hailfed was still working in his office at Calupet City's downtown district. Maneesk could see unknown ships hovering over the skyline in that direction. Lights of differing colors intermittently beamed down from underneath their hulls and into different buildings. She knew people were dying wherever those lights shone. And Hailfed was down there in the midst of it.

“Beynart!” she screamed. “We have to go save Hailfed! Do you know the way?”

There was momentary pause. Then the robot stomped his left foot a single time. This was an affirmative answer.

“Okay!” Maneesk swallowed hard and made herself ready. “Let’s go! Right now, Beynart!”

The outmoded Optiplex 5 began to move. He came around the house on the south side and stepped over the picket fencing. Maneesk continued steadyng herself against the ledge of the portal. This position was never intended for passengers while in transit and she found the hanging on a very difficult task. But she managed. Within a few steps Beynart and Maneesk were in the fray.

Cyborg Vatistans rallied to hinder the big robot. Two on his left leg and one on his right.

They seemed perplexed by what to do with him. He moved as if he were alive but shooting him made little difference. And he was so big. Beynart swatted two away and then grabbed the third and threw it across the street. Then he quickened his pace towards the skyline. Other cyborgs sporadically offered resistance but they were likewise ill-equipped for a foe this size. And their weapons were apparently calibrated to vaporize only human flesh. The cephalopods intended to overthrow Vatista while inflicting as little damage to the infrastructure as possible. Buildings and vehicles and all things made by human hands were left undamaged by the cyborg laser bolts or the beams from above. Beynart's chunky alloy hull was unaffected. On they pressed.

After three miles Beynart and Maneesk had made their way underneath the crown jewel of Hailfed's designs. Overhead weaved the most intricate knot of monorail bridges and rails to be found anywhere in the Ricchus lunar system. Only his mind could have envisioned it. Now hundreds of Vatistan cyborgs assaulted the train cars and buildings and streets and searched for huddled humans hiding in any crawlspace. Screams and flashes. City Planning was just ahead. The cyborgs had already been there.

Beynart brought his heavy right fist through the west-facing wall and caved it in. Bodies strewn everywhere. Noises of utter suffering. Maneesk fell to sobbing.

“He’s gone! My poor Hailfed is gone!”

The robot stomped his left foot two times. This was a negative response.

Beynart pulled down the partition to the room behind and there they found Hailfed lying on the ground. He was indeed alive. But he would not be for much longer. Since the building had already been cleared by the invaders the family were afforded a few last minutes of privacy. But inasmuch as Beynart’s entrance

was neither inconspicuous nor subtle, all three understood the infantry would soon return. Maneesk opened the door tucked behind Beynart’s left ear and climbed down to her mortally injured husband.

“Hailfed! What?” For the first time in anyone’s memory, Maneesk was suddenly out of words. And Hailfed suddenly found his.

“This was not. Unexpected.” The breathing was difficult and would soon be impossible. “Planetary Union knew they were coming. Just didn’t know. Where. I couldn’t. Tell you.”

Maneesk held his hand and nodded. Hailfed was invited to many such meetings that extended far beyond the scope of his job description. That unique mind of his was too important for too many applications. He pointed to the wall behind them and he spoke to the robot.

“Beynart. Hear. Me?” A single heavy stomp. “Behind me. Next room. Rocket. One way. To. Tretus. Take Maneesk. Put her. In. It.”

“No! I won’t leave you! I won’t leave Vatista! This is my home! My people! I want to fight and die with my people! With you!”

But Beynart was her automaton. That meant he was her protector, even before he was her friend. The danger was obvious and the problem causing her grief was unsolvable. Only one action was logical. The robot picked up Maneesk with his left hand and collapsed the opposite wall with his right fist. There they found a makeshift launch tube and a one person rocket clearly designed by Hailfed and no one else. Parts salvaged and modified from monorail hubs under construction. He must have worked on this for months at the expense of all other projects. She understood instantly.

“Great idea, honey. I love you too.”

Turns out the gargantuan monorail mixmaster was not his crown jewel after all. She quickly assessed that this craft had been designed for one passenger from the beginning. Hailfed had certainly done the math and concluded

HER AUTOMATON

constructing a transport vehicle large enough to support their combined weight was out of the question. She did not want to go, but now how could she not? Was all of this to come to nothing?

More cyborgs surrounded the crumbled building. Apparently news of the Optiplex 5 had reached whatever passes for engineers among the cephalopods and the new recruits had brought a modified weapon. One well able to saw through any and all known metals. The first blast severed Beynart's right leg below the knee. He stumbled and collapsed roughly onto the remaining metallic stump and thrust Maneesk towards the escape rocket.

"No!" She screamed. "No! Beynart! No!"

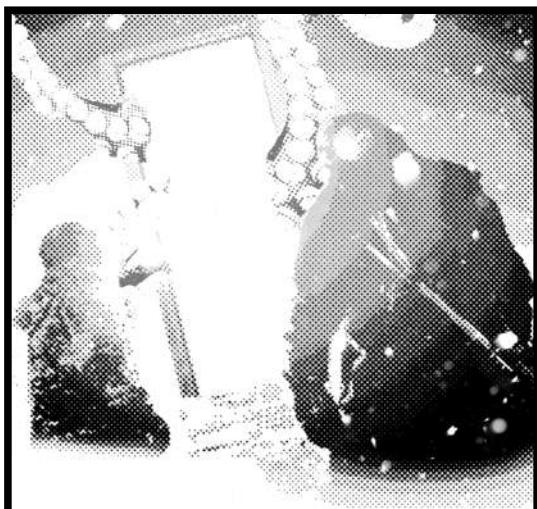
With great effort, her automaton mounted up on the remains of his right leg just high enough to stomp the left one last time. Maneesk sobbed and then did the only thing left to do. Beynart turned to face the cyborgs and their upgraded cutting torch. He picked up a handful of bricks and rubble hurled it at his attackers, killing two. Seven remained. The new cannon was undamaged.

Maneesk crawled inside the cockpit of the oneway rocket and the hatch closed automatically. Pressure sensors inside the craft activated an immediate launch sequence. The nosecone pierced what remained of the roof twenty seconds later. Down below was bloodshed and carnage and the utter ruin of all Vatistan civilization. She alone would survive from her entire line of people. Soon the cephalopod horde would arrive and occupy every vermin-emptied city on the fully eradicated moon. But from the angle of her cockpit, Maneesk could see none of that.

Her rocket soon broke the atmosphere on a trajectory towards the moon of Tretus. Gaseous Ricchus loomed enormous in front of her, just as it always had back home on her own moon. The Planetary Union had a garon

gas mining colony on Lextre, but Maneesk knew of no military outpost within the Ricchus lunar system. This was something else. Tretus was not unlike her home in many ways, but it certainly was unique in one respect. This moon orbited within the great Ricchus ring system itself. Very difficult to monitor every signal emanating from Tretus due to a nearly impenetrable layer of natural interference. Made sense for the Planetary Union to select Tretus as its beachhead for the coming counteroffensive.

Plus, Tretus is the smallest of the eight major moons circling massive Ricchus. This also made perfect sense. All the push was for getting smaller.



A strange door surfaces in the middle of the South Pole.

Nobody knows how it got there.
Nobody knows what's behind.

Walter Gibson, a seasoned war correspondent, will be joining a group of scientists from every nation to find out.

Grab your gear and accompany him as he walks...

**THROUGH THE GATES
OF MADNESS**

DOG

OUR STORY SO FAR...

NEO SUSHI CITY. CHASED AFTER A DEAL ENDED WRONG, DATA-SMUGGLER DOGERON KENAN REACHES HIS HIDEOUT.

JAVIER
CABRERA
WRITER

CARLOS
CABRERA
ARTIST

SOMEONE WANTS
WHAT DOG IS
SMUGGLING BAD
ENOUGH TO KILL
HIM FOR IT.

BEFORE HE CAN
DOWNLOAD THE
DATA, SNIPERS BLAST
HIS APARTMENT TO
PIECES.

WITH RETRIEVERS
ABOUT TO TEAR
DOWN THE DOOR,
DOG FINDS HIMSELF
PINNED DOWN.

A CARD UP THE SLEEVE, DOG CRAWLS TO HIS VIDEOPHONE AND CALLS THE POLICE, EVEN THOUGH HE IS A CRIMINAL HIMSELF.

SOMEONE'S
TRYING TO KILL
ME, SEND A
SQUAD CAR!

THIS BETTER
NOT BE A PRANK,
CITIZEN!

LATER...

THE LOCK ITS
HACKED! THAT'S
AN INFRACTION,
CITIZEN!

THAT TOOK
CARE OF THE
ONES AT THE DOOR.
NOW, FOR THE

OPEN, THIS IS
THE POLICE!

SLAM!
SLAM!

OKAY, BUT
YOU BETTER GET
READY KID, THIS IS
GONNA HURT!

THINKING DOG IS TRYING TO ESCAPE, THE SNIPERS LET LOOSE. THEY HAVE TAKEN THE SMUGGLER'S BAIT. THEY BECOME THE CITY'S PROBLEM.

TAKING FIRE! ROOFTOP
ACROSS THE STREET!
NEED BACKUP!

HOT DAMN!

UNNFF! MY
GUTS!

MOMENTS LATER...

A SQUAD CAR,
THAT'S MY CUE!

YOU'RE DONE
NOW, SLOBS!

WITH THE SNIPERS TAKEN CARE OF, DOG ESCAPES THROUGH THE WINDOW.

LATER
SLICKERS!

BUDDA!
BUDDA!

OFFICER DOWN!
REQUESTING ASSIS--

HEY, GET
BACK HERE!

...BUT NOT FAR! WITH THE SQUAD CAR POINTING ITS CANNONS AT HIM, AND THE COP INSIDE THE APARTMENT EAGER TO TEST HIS TASER, DOG FINDS HIMSELF WORSE THAN BEFORE.

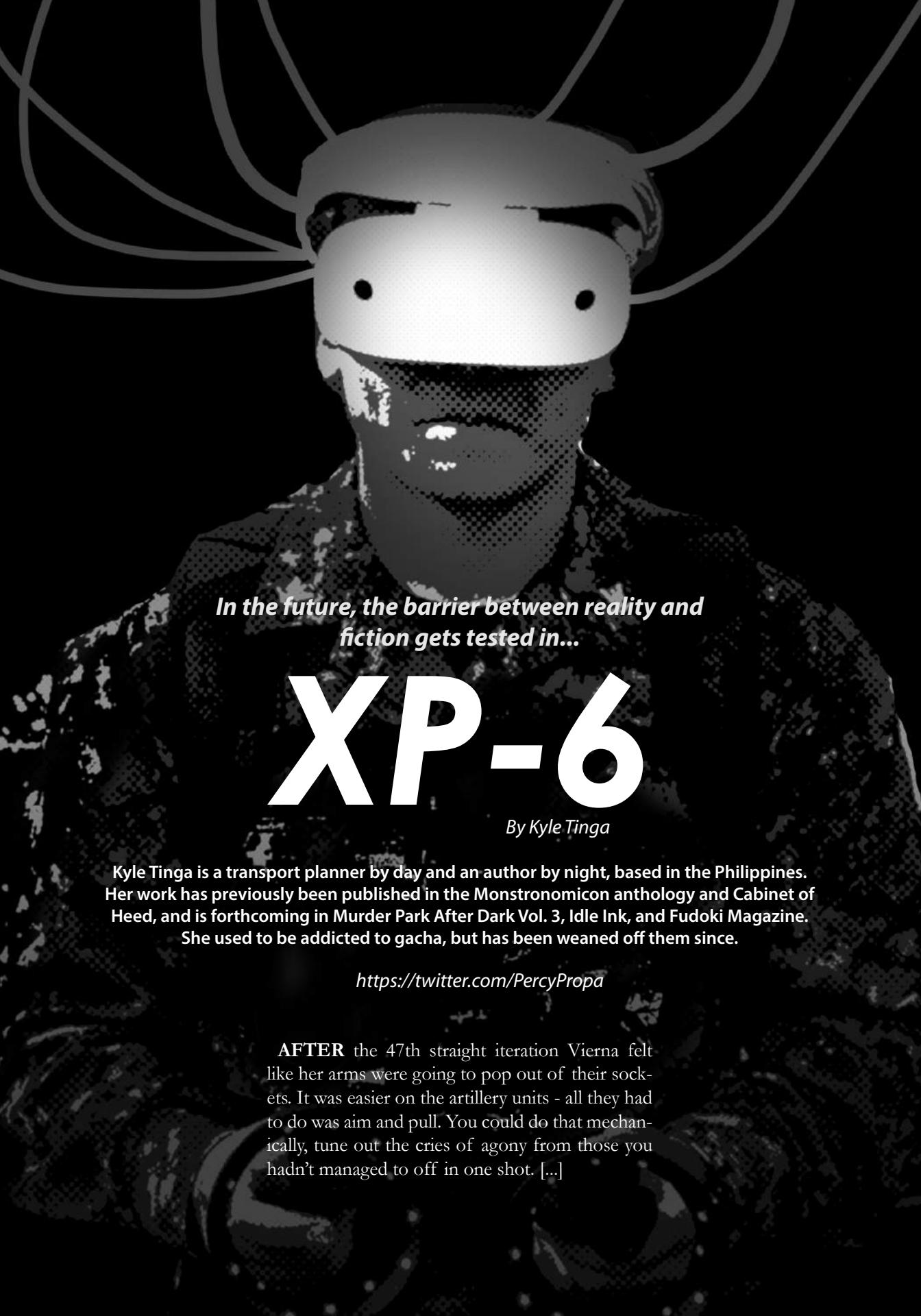
COME BACK
INSIDE OR I'LL
TASE YOU!

CITIZEN!
STOP OR WE WILL
OPEN FIRE!

TAKE IT
EASY, CHAMP! I'M
UNARMED!

NOW CITIZEN!
MOVE!

NEXT: EASY TRIGGER!



In the future, the barrier between reality and fiction gets tested in...

XP-6

By Kyle Tinga

Kyle Tinga is a transport planner by day and an author by night, based in the Philippines. Her work has previously been published in the *Monstronomicon* anthology and *Cabinet of Heed*, and is forthcoming in *Murder Park After Dark Vol. 3*, *Idle Ink*, and *Fudoki Magazine*.

She used to be addicted to gacha, but has been weaned off them since.

<https://twitter.com/PercyPropa>

AFTER the 47th straight iteration Vierna felt like her arms were going to pop out of their sockets. It was easier on the artillery units - all they had to do was aim and pull. You could do that mechanically, tune out the cries of agony from those you hadn't managed to off in one shot. [...]

[...] Think about your next meal or whether that catty girl from New Hallix on Meet Cute would be eliminated this week. Instead, here she was, her axe coming down on head after head until every last enemy began to seem like just another animal marching to the slaughterhouse.

“Here they come again,” the soldier muttered to herself, “cresting over the hill.” Without any rhyme or reason the enemy staggered forward, beginning the pattern all over again. Killing and being killed and killing and being killed looping endlessly as the axe came down swinging-

A sound carried on the wind, the faint chime that signalled that the iterations had temporarily ceased. All around were soldiers embracing each other, weeping into uniforms regardless of insignia and breaking down into shoulder-shaking sobs. Vierna looked towards her axe, the metal blade splattered with viscous globs of blood. It was time to go home.

Trudging through the mud and sludge of the battlefield in order to get to the access portal back to base, Vierna tried to recall what she’d had for breakfast, who she had spoken to, anything that wasn’t the feeling of dirt and corpses beneath her boots. Nothing. Every little thing was coming up blank, scrubbed clean by the burning sensation engulfing muscles forced to swing downwards again and again on an endless loop. How long had it been since the first iteration? Five hours? Ten? Sunken eyes looked up towards the digital clock that towered over everyone who came through the fortress gates. The time was 6:34. One hour and thirty-four minutes. With a bitter laugh she pressed onwards, her elongated ears twitching with every shuffling footstep and ding of an alert.

As she passed through the fortress’ blindingly white corridors towards the promise of sustenance, the Lapin couldn’t help but turn her tired eyes towards the posters that were plastered all over the walls. They were adorned with a series of bright-eyed, eager soldiers, each one looking ready to serve. Here was Henrietta clinging onto a grenade launcher twice her size, her icy

blue eyes daring onlookers to judge her by her diminutive frame. There was Kanako, that mischievous vixen from the East, giving the camera a coy little smile even as she flashed it the one-fingered salute. Oh, there was a familiar one. Edging a little bit closer to the curling corners of the poster closest to the canteen doors, Vierna let out a dusty little chuckle. “Now who’s this little bunny?”

The cadet on the poster with her hands on her hips had gleaming eyes and shining fur, her posture stiff as a rod and her smile bright enough to bring out the sun. Vierna tried to replicate that just for a moment, but could only bring her mouth up about halfway. That photo had been on her recruitment day hadn’t it? Just before her first deployment. Just before that first day the axe came down, slicing through muscle and bone like a knife through butter. The first swing had been hard, jamming against Vierna’s muscles and forcing her to put all of her weight into it. The second swing was easier, once she’d figured out the rhythm to it. Again and again as the enemy soldiers wouldn’t stop coming, wouldn’t stop blindly walking towards the certainty of death. She wanted to warn them to stop, to yield, and their eyes were terrified behind their helmets. She could see them trying to fight back, as they tried to run and-

“You know I used to call you Chubby Bunny?”

The Lapin snorted a little bit, recalling the memory. “Yeah, I do. Thirty pounds ago, before I slimmed down for-” She stopped cold in her thoughts, realising the voice of the person behind her wasn’t an inner thought. Swiftly doing an about-turn with all the poise she could muster on such short notice, the Lapin gave a picture-perfect salute.

“General!”

“At ease, Vierna.” Giving his own half-hearted salute was the General, easygoing smile and dull, lifeless eyes at odds with each other. She hated this part. She hated having to talk to this man who always made her soul feel on edge and

all her fur stand on end. She hated having to play nice with the devil.

The General looked towards the poster with a little smile and nod, those dark eyes shedding a single tear. "You were so cute back then, you know? Although, of course, you're still awfully cute now..." Without warning he reached out towards Vierna and began to stroke her head, fingers tousling the perfectly brushed fur this way and that. On the surface the gesture was gentle, scratching between those fluffy ears in a way that could almost be called affectionate if one weren't looking too closely. The Lapin was frozen stiff, blinking back a cold sweat and trying not to move. If she stayed very, very still, perhaps he would just pass her over. She could handle boring or stiff or worse any day. Let today not be the day she became interesting.

"Sir, as you are aware I am on my mandated breaktime-"

"As required by government regulation, yes yes yes." He leaned in close, nearly nose to nose, and the Lapin had to hold her breath at the smell of pungent odors of cigarette smoke and junk food on his breath. Her ears twitched in alarm, but she dared not move or even attempt to breathe. One second. Two. Three. The General pulled away abruptly, lips pursed into a frown even as the bunny breathed a little sigh of relief. Perhaps there was somebody up there after all.

"I've changed my mind. Tell Layla to come to my office."

Vierna's eyes widened in horror at the order. "With all due respect, General, Layla's practically a child!" A child she had held in her arms at christening, looking at her baby blue eyes and listening to her tinkling giggles for the first time. A child she had tutored through math homework and looked at stars and baked carrot cake with. That child, that shining child, the child of a rotting corpse buried deep beneath the crumbling dirt and pine trees.

That easygoing grin widened just a little bit, pitch black eyes boring through all of Vierna's carefully constructed facade. "She's been doing

well on the battlefield, and the next deployments will be a struggle if I don't look to promote more... capable people to positions of authority."

The words were coming out all at once, stammered and stuttered. "Sir you c-I mean sh-Layla's my sister's girl I... You can't... You can't do this..." But the words were too late. The heavy footsteps of solid boots were already far away, and the Lapin was left to struggle under the weight of the past.

Trudging into the canteen with shuffling feet and a heavy heart, Vierna looked up to see her niece cheerfully chatting up a storm with other girls over their slop. Had she ever been that young before? So eager, so excited, so ready to fight for a cause she didn't quite understand. Layla was absolutely giddy when she heard the promotion news, bouncing up and down in her seat with unbridled glee. She seemed unaware of the half-smile on Vierna's face, of the way her ears drooped low and her eye began to twitch. The congratulations of the younger Lapin's friends and comrades were barely audible in her aunt's ears over the sound of her own heartbeat and her sister's final words to take care of her daughter echoing and mingling again and again and again-

[THE 48TH ITERATION OF XP-6 IS ABOUT TO BEGIN. ALL SOLDIERS, PREPARE TO DEPLOY.]

Had it been that long already? Vierna turned left and right, vision slowly returning from pitch black as she found herself on the battlefield. When had it started? When had the axe found its way into her hands, gleaming shiny and new? But now there was no more time for her niece or for herself. Here came the enemy, uniforms a dull grey against the fading oranges and reds of the sky. Here they came towards the formations, marching without pause and without strategy towards their demise.

[Up three, then to the-]

"Left, left, always left." Up three then to the

left and then take out twenty with the axe coming down and down again before moving up and taking out ten. Vierna marched along as the others also marched to their places, no longer needing the voice of the General ringing in their ears. Each chanting to themselves the order, the placement, the number of bodies that would be found at their feet again in readiness. The same as always in every iteration. The same as always in every iteration. The same as always in eve-

In a quiet voice she whispered, “Layla?”

Layla wasn’t supposed to be here. Layla wasn’t supposed to be fighting on this stage. Layla wasn’t supposed to be holding a mace already covered in blood dripping towards the ground. Layla wasn’t supposed to be walking towards her with her eyes glazed over, her veins bulging out of her skin and her mouth smeared a brilliant red.

“Look, auntie!” The wretch was speaking in that sing-song voice, that voice which didn’t belong to whatever was before her now. “The General promoted me! He told me what a good girl I was and what a good job I’ve been doing!” It was spitting out bits of gooey flesh and flecks of white spittle with every word, eyes flashing red and green in rapid succession. “Only he said there were too many of us good kids and what a shame it is but he could only promote the one of us!” The shining white fatigues were already splattered with blood all over the arms and legs and chest, but that didn’t seem to faze their wearer. “So it was her and her and her and then me and now it’s just me and now we can work together forever and ever and ever and and-”

An animal was coming towards the slaughter. A beast was coming to be slain. There was no turning back, no hiding from the war and the General and all of his little monstrosities, but at the least here and now it would mean something. “Protect my daughter.” The words of someone Vierna had loved so sweetly, so dearly. Protect her baby. Protect her child. Only there was no laughing baby anymore, no cheerful girl,

no eager cadet. Only this.

The axe came swinging down.

[48TH ITERATION HALTED DUE TO ERROR. SCENARIO RESTARTING.]

Had it been that long already? Vierna turned left and right, vision slowly returning from pitch black as she found herself on the battlefield.

the first
time is
the best
one.

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Things can always change in...

Time Again

By Judson Blake

New York actor, director, and emerging fiction writer, Judson Blake, has been published internationally in many journals, including: Whistling Shade, Ariel Chart, Adelaide, The Loch Raven Review, Scarlet Leaf Review, Lamplit Underground, Red Fez, Fiction on the Web, Bewildering Stories, CC&D Magazine, The Literary Yard, and Freedom Fiction Periodical. Two of his stories were selected for the 2019 American Emerging Writers Series, and his full-length play, *Perversion*, ran for five weeks in the West Village.

TELLA inhabited the Neme, where the sun rose purple and yellow and stayed. If Fotine wished, the clouds would reform exactly as they had a week ago but Tella was glad they were different now.

“I must talk to Fotine,” she said. “He doesn’t know everything.”

“He seems to,” said Clotho who was a friend. They had been in school together and in those years made countless drawings of trees and the yellow and white clouds that hung above them. Always they had been attentive to the various forms of clouds; the women minded the sky, watching it, seeking out the strange shapes, and marking how every shape mutated to new shapes with some new meaning it was hard to guess.

“To make the clouds form exactly as they were a week ago, or last year, that must be hard,” said Clotho. “It must be like making time repeat, but in a local sort of way.”

“That’s just why we don’t need it,” said Tella.

Clotho languished and her arms hung down from the tree snake-like, for she was always in repose.

That night Tella went to join the others in the temenos of the Neme. Most of the citizenry could not make it, tired from work and interested in their own preoccupations, but those who did come knew each other quite well. They each saw their own path but were always just as much interested in the paths of others. Tella brought up the matter when she could. [...]

[...] “I don’t want the clouds to repeat,” she told them. “I want them to be different every day.”

“Oh, but it’s simply amazing,” Alice said. “How he can make the clouds change.”

“He doesn’t make them change. He makes them change back. Changing they can do by themselves.”

“But they are different most days,” said Dan. “I don’t know how you notice. I suspect clouds to you seem the same when they’re not. Remember how much work this is for Fotine: he has to make sure each molecule of air and water vapor goes into exactly the same place at the right time and then has exactly the same velocity and acceleration as it had at precisely some time, but all at the same time, last month. Or whenever. He has to have it all planned. I mean, how can he ever keep track?”

“He has nothing else to do,” Tella said. “And how are you going to feel if he starts doing this with other things, not just clouds? Just the other day, I saw you put a spoon on the counter, take it up to eat, and then half an hour later it was in exactly the same place—when you thought you’d washed it and put it away. Now how does that make you feel? Even things when you put them someplace, they don’t stay, they go back to where they were before. And you don’t even know when before is. It’s all Fotine’s doing. He’s playing with time.”

“Well, don’t be resentful,” said Alice. “He doesn’t do it always.”

“Maybe not,” said Tella, “but what is always anyway? And if things repeat in the kitchen, then what will happen next?”

“What is next?” the other asked.

“I know what is not next,” Tella rejoined. “I know when things don’t repeat. And I like that. And you should too. What’s going to happen to the Neme, which is where we are, if where we are is mixed up with where we’ve been? Don’t you think about that?”

“We’ll always have where we’ve been,” Alice said in her languid way. Her eyes took on a

starry haze and her voice a melodic way of making any remark into a lyrical refrain.

“You’re living in a dream,” Tella said.

“If you can remember a thing, you don’t need to dream. Why, then you always have it with you. Or you can have. Think of prehistoric times, of all the ancient creatures that have lived under this sky before us and looked at it the way we do but never guessed that the clouds they saw are exactly the ones we see now. It’s such a blessing. So rare. Statistically of course, but in so many other ways. To think that what they had was never lost. When it comes back you can enjoy it all over again.”

Tella felt a backward wish to undermine her friend.

“If you missed it the first time you can catch up.”

“Exactly,” Alice replied with a lilt of assurance. “If I live through something twice it’s the same as getting that much more time.”

“Twice as much. Huh.”

“Uh-huh. And if I do it three or four times I get that much more.”

“A real savings.”

“And if you do enough of it you forget that time is passing altogether.”

“Yeah,” said Tella. “That’s the part that I don’t get. Time passing is what I want to keep in mind.”

Alice looked sadly at her friend.

“You fuss an awful lot,” she said sympathetically. “You know, Tella, I’ll tell you: you act like a disruptive force. You make things so complicated. You could be missing out on something important. I mean if a thing repeats...”

“If you weren’t paying attention the first time, then you get to make up for that.”

“Well, exactly. And it means that what we have has always been here, always. Like a promise we didn’t know about, waiting for us.”

But Tella was unconvinced. She wondered what could be in Alice’s head. What did the woman mean anyway, waiting for us? It was something that already happened, so what was waiting to her? Tella felt the nagging sense of

TIME AGAIN

misappropriation that came to her often when she looked up at the sky and wondered what Fotine might have done.

Tella's friends gathered around her, for there was a great deal of love among them and none of them hated Fotine. Each wanted an invisible thread running from his own heart to the heart of another. This would be established now and at this moment all believed it would remain unbroken. Tella rejoiced to feel their closeness and how they all cared for her and for what she said even though they could not give importance to her concerns the way she did. She felt their warmth and their bowering enclosure like the petals of a lily, moist and promising and unwilling to let her be alone with her disquiet. She wished that that could go on forever.

But later that evening when she was alone she did not want to look up at the night sky. By making the clouds repeat, Fotine was betraying her and she knew that he was really betraying everyone else too, though they did not see it. Or did not care.

Tella waited several days before approaching Fotine. She was hesitant and thoughtful, especially since she felt no certainty that she could have any effect and might come away looking like a fool. She would of course tell everyone how it went whether good or bad. Then one night she put on her best ivory dress, the one that had pleats and no special markings. She wanted to cast an aura that could not be picked apart.

Fotine lived under ground, beneath the bole of a giant tree. It was a primitive dwelling, carved out by either his ancestors or his mentors, since what he did, not just with the clouds, was, like the tree, *arcana* that had to be handed down or at least studied more than anyone else had the patience for. The ambiance of the tree, living right under it where the roots ran, that surely affected the man and some said it made him a little strange. Tella had heard that he could live nowhere else; that if he left the tree for too long he would fall ill and might even die.

"I want you to stop changing the clouds," she said.

"I don't change them. They change themselves. I only sometimes change them back."

"Rechanging them. Back to what they were at some other time. I don't like it."

"I'm surprised you even noticed. You must have a photographic memory for clouds."

"I can tell."

Fotine was not a young man. Tella remembered him from when she was small and her friends would point out where he lived and how rarely they saw him, but they all said he was very old.

"He must get lonely," Tella said.

"He has his tree," said another. "That's enough for him."

Now as they spoke and broke the ground of strangeness between them, the lines in his face deepened with puzzled sorrow. He had the strange air of being concerned by what she said but at the same time hearing her over a great distance farther than she could see. His gaze drifted over the glass and screens of his apparatus. Its pointy vanes extended up to the ceiling grazed now with the smoke of candles and gritty votive fires. Up there she knew the penciled vanes like needles poked through the soil at night. She had seen them by moonlight. They went like fingers reaching up between the gnarly roots. In the day other vanes, black and branching, came up in places not far away and sometimes stayed all day. Seeing one of these in the grass by the slanted light she could mistake it for a darkling hyacinth.

"Anyway," Tella said standing, "I want you to do better. I want this reversion to cease."

"I'll try," he said and his tone was almost pleading. "But you see it isn't only me."

"Who else is it?"

He gestured towards the apparatus piled like crates of produce and old stones.

"Some others. And other things. I don't know. I don't know everything."

"I'm sure of that," she said and promptly left.

Yet in a few days it became obvious that things were not better. Alice, now, repeated. She actually spoke in response to nothing, to no one's voice, saying things she had said days, even weeks before. Exactly the same words.

"...If you can remember a thing, you don't need to dream. Why, then you always have it with you. Or you can have. Think of prehistoric times..."

"Stop it," Tella snapped.

"... of all the ancient creatures that have lived under this sky..."

"Will you stop? Or I'll yank out this table cloth."

"...Statistically of course, but in so many other ways...." Alice's voice radiated confident sweetness luxuriantly prolonged.

Tella yanked the table cloth and Alice's coffee spilled on the floor. The woman stood up suavely and looked kindly at Tella.

"I know you can't help the way you feel," she said. Her voice again had a melodic lilt.

"At least you said something intelligent."

That night at the temenos, Tella met the others and they talked about their day. But there was a strange hesitancy when there came a moment of silence and they looked at Tella as if they had to say something but couldn't think what. They knew she had an idea they might not want to hear.

"You see?" Tella turned on them. "It's not getting better. It's only getting worse."

"Well, you made him promise," said Dan.

"Yes, and he hasn't kept his word."

"Yes, he has. You made him promise to change and so this is the change you coerced him into. If you hadn't entreated him, it would be just clouds. Now it's the clouds and Alice too."

"It isn't the clouds," Clotho said, speaking again from her tree. "I've watched. They're definitely different now. I don't think he repeats a single one."

"No matter," said Tella. "Alice is what he's making repeat now. Used to be just a cloud and

now it's a person. She's caught in a time circle and she can't get out."

"Never?"

"Well, pretty much never. Or at least when I saw her this afternoon. And if she's different for a while, who's to say it won't happen again? Fotine doesn't control everything. He's sometimes very careless. He started her repeating and he has no idea when she'll do it again."

"Again?" said Dan. "Hm. Again is a funny word."

That night sitting in the dark by her window Tella watched up at the streaks of clouds. Their long fingers extended out in threads near the horizon and its gloom promised encroachment of a waiting presence she could not name. She started to feel certain of a strange idea: that the deciding factor would be to get Fotine out from under his tree. If he were somewhere else he might think differently. He might consider something in his own thinking that would not repeat.

"Being under that tree all this time, for years really, that could affect a man's mind."

No one had any argument with that.

So off Tella went again, this time in a green dress, just as tasteful as before, with no accoutering pins. She sat in the middle of his home and admired all the work he had put into it. She was more confident now, despite the fact that there seemed to be no reason to be assured. With deliberate motions up over his head, Fotine showed how he trimmed the roots like hoary beards of old men, where the fine fur of them hung down.

"See, they are like hair. They are looking for ground," he said, "but you see there is only air. And us."

"And all your stuff. But this is a chance to get away from it, Fotine. Come with me. You'll meet people you should have known a long time ago. But they'll be new. It will be an adventure for you."

She saw he was leery. He might even be afraid. "It's a sizeable group," she went on. "But it

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isn't everyone. You won't be embarrassed or put on the spot."

That seemed to enlighten him. With his soft voice as if she were hearing him from a great distance, he agreed to follow her.

When they got there the place was illumined by lights high up, which was the way Tella wanted it, so there were no shadows inside the disk. All stood back and Tella placed herself on the opposite side from Fotine so there was a lighted space between them and they could speak out across it. Calmly Tella described what she had seen, how even though the clouds seemed not to repeat anymore, Alice repeated and in a way that was worse. Tella complained that it altered the social ambiance for everyone and it made Alice a less enjoyable person than she had been before. Fotine said he understood. But was that all? Had she brought him here just to discuss this one person?

"One person is important," said Tella. "One person turned back on herself is an aberration that must be addressed. Alice can't speak to any of us anymore without we have doubts she's responding to us as we are."

"Perhaps she's responding to you as you were."

"Then we aren't relating at all. That's not good enough."

Fotine hesitated. He had the shyness of a man who was not used to speaking to a crowd but wanted to be brave enough to endure it.

"Well," he said, "if you all feel that way, I suppose, well.... Do you?"

He looked around at those assembled and got only murmured replies.

"You really think what Tella describes is not the way it should be? Do you?"

He asked them openly but again there were only vague murmurs. Tella felt she had better speak or the whole matter would fall apart from indifference in the crowd.

"It isn't right, Fotine. It isn't human."

With that he assented and the discussion became dispersed. Others offering their own opinions and countering the opinions of those

who spoke first. Tella saw that nothing substantial was going to develop after that. She sought a way to taper off.

"You may as well go on," she called to Fotine. "I know you'll do the best you can."

Fotine assented, bowed and walked back out of the light. Tella turned to talking with the others, about how their day had gone and what plans they had for the next. There was hardly a word about Alice who wandered among them, dipping into one conversation and then another. She seemed oblivious to being the subject of any talk at all. All chatted among themselves for several minutes. Then without warning Tella turned around and saw Fotine. He was exactly where he had been before. He took the same pose. He made the same gestures and his mouth was open as it had been when he was about to speak as he did now:

"...what Tella describes is not the way it should be?" he was saying and he looked around with the same spread of his hands as before.

Tella stood aghast and watched the man repeat several of the things he had said minutes before with no prompting from anyone.

"Fotine, you've got to stop."

"What?" He looked around at her, apparently surprised he was not alone. She walked across the open disk and took his hand.

"Let me help you out," she said. "Out of this little circle."

She led him away from where the light was brightest and along a path among sleeping trees and fronds that reached for their arms as they passed. Voices that had been present and urgent a moment before receded and gave way to the whisper of a light breeze in the leaves. Tella walked him all the way to his earthen home. She waited and saw him disappear into the light underneath. Then she departed into the dark, glad that the matter was in some way settled.

The next day was like any other. As evening came on everyone saw that the clouds were different. Several complimented Tella, saying

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that now they saw how her insistence was warranted and it was really better if the clouds were different every day. A new form, a new shape, it was like new life, some said. There would be a new texture to the clouds and their mutations in the wind. They felt encouraged. They engaged Tella and there was no air of anyone treating her as an out-of-step person. But as night grew near they looked around and saw something that many thought very strange: they saw that the stars now were in different places. It was not just that they moved in one solemn curve as they would by the sidereal rotation everyone knew. It was something else. Now they arranged in new patterns, or not into patterns at all, some said. Everyone remarked that it seemed strange.

For a while they worried about it, some not even accepting that it was so. Others countered them and pointed out particular stars to support their arguments. Dan in particular strolled among them, carefully pointing out stars that were not where they had been only a few nights before.

“They’re moved.” He nodded to himself in a speculative way.

“But not very far,” said a small man who knew stars by their color and luminosity. “They’re not where they were, but where they were at some other time, if you get my meaning.”

“I thought,” said someone else, “the stars were supposed to stay where they were. I mean from one night to the next.”

“They know their place,” said another.

“Well, you see the trouble Fotine can cause,” one said.

“Can he do that? They’re certainly not where they’re supposed to be.”

“No. They’re where they were.”

“You mean in some ancient time,” said Alice. She strode as if she might swoon and her body had a willowy leaning in tune with a faraway thought.

“Probably,” said Clotho. “I’ve known Fotine a long time. He goes way back.”

Over the next nights the crowd at the temenos

formed into allied groups and argued about how to deal with the new arrangements of the stars. Soon they set about the task at hand and some scurried to form a system of new constellations, writing down each one and giving it a name. They compared the lists they had made and tried to find agreement without dispute. But many of them blamed Tella for the disruption.

“Well,” said Clotho, “Alice doesn’t repeat as much. I’ve listened to her. Not at all, as far as I can tell.”

“That’s good,” said Tella.

“She likes the Neme. I don’t think she will ever leave.”

Clotho leaned into the bark of the tree and let her leg dangle down. She felt relaxed when matters like that were settled and the tree especially gave her native comfort. But not everyone agreed. Some looked sideways at Tella and she could tell they were avoiding saying anything unkind.

“She can’t fix one thing without making something else worse,” one said under his breath.

“First it was just clouds,” said another. “Then it was Alice. And now it’s the stars.”

“Well,” said Clotho, “we only see them at night.”

“Bad enough.”

“But it’s all for the better,” Dan said, “because with our new arrangements, with our lines and designs connecting the stars, anyone can see we are making good headway.”

Indeed they showed a remarkable level of resolve and creative imagination. Several drew up sheets and charts and spread them out on tables to argue and show others who were eager to see and compare. The talk went on for hours. Even so, they resolved that, once they had collated their work, they would approach Fotine themselves. They would form a delegation and make sure that some of their asterisms and constellations would not go to waste but would find permanence, or at the very least, recurrence.

Tella opined that she could not think why.

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